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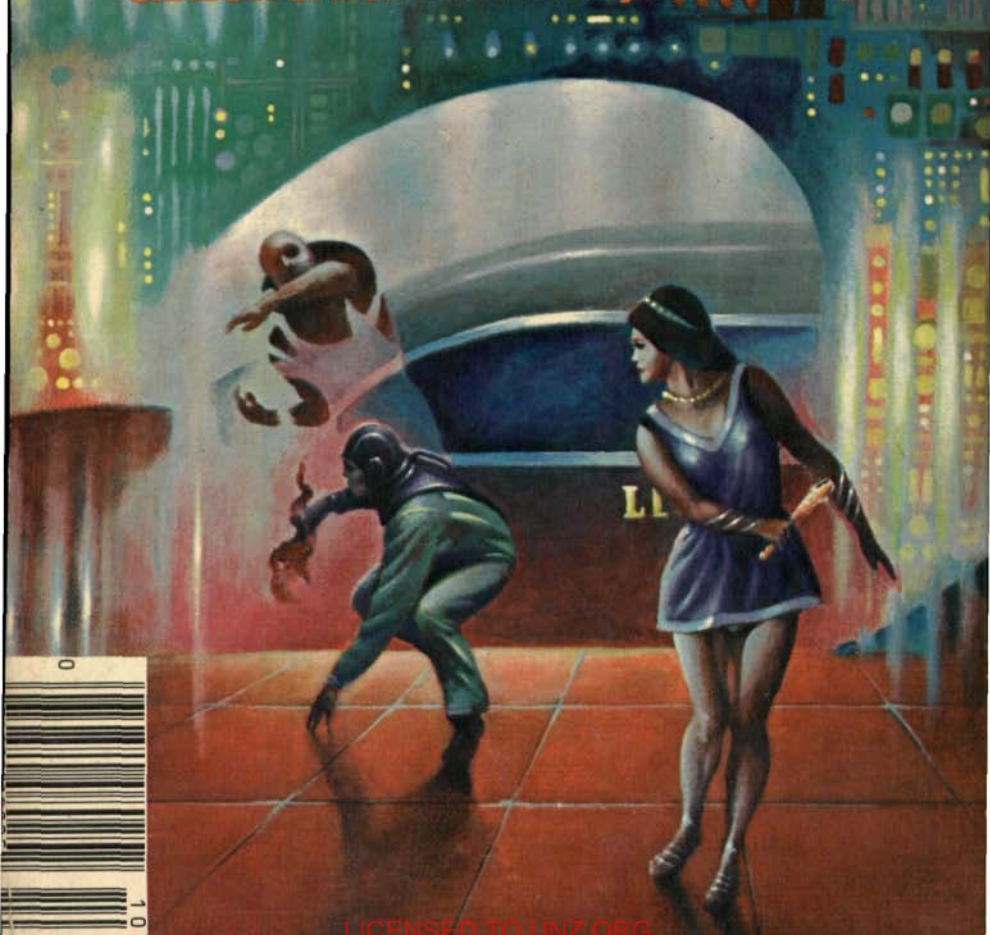
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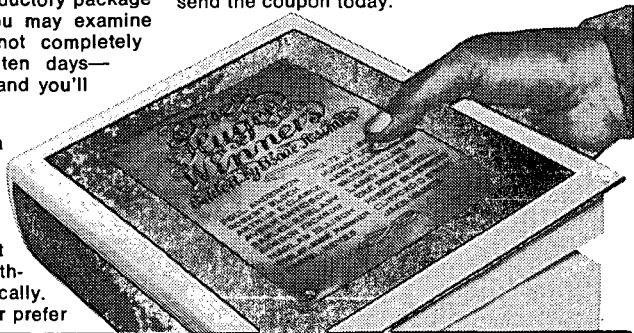
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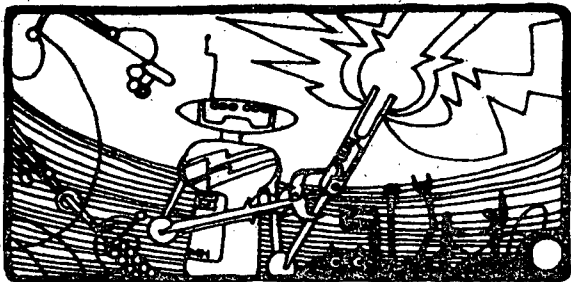
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# ...OR SO YOU SAY



*Letters intended for publication should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of each sheet, and addressed to Or So You Say, Box 409, Falls Church, Va. 22046.*

EDITORIAL NOTE: Our letters column this issue is brimming over with comments and controversy. Sam Moskowitz, whose letter follows, takes exception to Thom Perry's guest editorial last issue. Any number of readers take exception to Rich Brown's "Two of a Kind" in our March issue—and Brown responds. And yet more readers have responses to Steven Duff's letter and my editorial (two separate topics) in that same issue. Suddenly everyone has something to say. Under the circumstances I am giving up my customary editorial space in favor of a longer *Or So You Say*; the editorial written for this issue (dealing in part with the background of "A World of One's Own") will appear next issue. One immediate correction to my March editorial on the MidAmeriCon: The woman who organized the belly dance at that convention wrote me to point out that she was the first, not the third dancer. I was in error in attributing the organization of this program item to the woman who was embarrassingly inept as a dancer. (But that makes her inclusion in the lineup of five dancers even more incomprehensible, I'm afraid.)—TW

Dear Ted:

I have read the effusion titled.  
(cont. on page 123)

"Mythology Deluxe" by Thomas Perry which occupies your editorial pages in the July, 1977 *AMAZING SCIENCE FICTION* and I don't think you should be in such a rush to apologize for your "correction" of Barry Malzberg.

I have attempted to pinpoint what Perry's theme for his piece is and (aside from establishing himself as a great researcher, after all, he did go to the library and look up some stories in old newspapers) have decided it rests in the paragraph about Hugo Gernsback's loss of control of The Experimenter Publishing Co., Inc., publishers of *AMAZING STORIES* the early part of 1929, where he concludes: "Apparently it was too painful to believe that the publisher of America's first Science Fiction magazine had simply gone broke." Now Perry knows, that Hugo Gernsback as President and therefore publisher of The Experimenter Publishing Co., Inc., had not gone broke, and he presents no evidence from his secondary sources, short newspaper stories, that the corporation had gone broke. Just the opposite, he states that a "petition for involuntary bankruptcy was filed on February 20, 1929." Now a petition of involuntary bankruptcy is no proof that a company is broke. It was, until the change in the law, a legal device where three creditors—no matter how small—could force a company to break up its assets in order to receive payment, if they filed at the same time.

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In 1970 we published a short story called "Breaking Point"—written by the editor under the name of "William C. Johnstone" for reasons explained in the editorial this issue. Now, seven years later, we have the sequel—a complete novella in which the threads of the first story are picked up and freshly woven, as the four offworlders, marooned on an alien planet about which they know very little, blunder into—

# A WORLD OF ONE'S OWN

DAVE BISHOFF & TED WHITE

I

IT HAD TAKEN days to climb down the ridge on which the lifeship module had landed. And what followed were weeks of endless hiking, of clusters of small incidents related to finding their way through alien terrain, weeks devoted to two simple tasks: survival and the seemingly endless trek to civilization—or whatever might pass for civilization on this unknown planet.

They had been weeks in which Aaron felt his powers as the group's psychological counsellor pushed to the limit. He had a basically unstable situation to deal with. The four of them had been assigned to their particular module in the colonial starship by a process best regarded as random—if there had been any larger plan, Aaron had long since decided, it was locked in the bureaucratic bowels of a computer somewhere back on Earth. There was Elton, a big bluff man who seemed to assume that size equated with authority and whom Aaron had not challenged for the role of nominal leader. And there was

Chaimon, thin and nervous, ever querulous at times, incessant complaining—and in some way the group's safety valve. When Chaimon stopped complaining, Aaron decided that was the time to get worried. Chaimon had come out of the Sleep of the Long Moment—the state which they had all made the long voyage between the stars—to confront with hysterics the breakup of the starship and the fact that they had been marooned on this unknown world. Dealing with him had been Aaron's first task on his own awakening. The fourth member of the group was Vana. She was not beautiful, and Aaron could not recall having met her during the pre-flight routine on Earth. But here, alone in alien wilderness with three men, she assumed a role of new importance. She had fallen into an easy alliance with Aaron over the days of hiking down the great ridge and across the rolling fields; their perceptions of their companions usually agreed. *We're the surrogate father and mother*, Aaron realized one evening at the campfire *we each minister to their needs*.

Illustrated by STEVE FABIAN



The first night they had spent on the alien world they had seen a bright light race across the distant landscape below them, describing a straight line from west to east. It had been the first tangible sign of habitation on the planet, although the lifeship module's instruments registered a source of radiation to the east—radiation of the specialized nature associated with spaceports.

Their goal was the spaceport—if that was what it was. And they had to hope that it was. But after attaining the flatlands they first found the monorail—a wide polished metal track that cut through the reddish alien grasses like a surgical slash—and began to follow it east, hoping to find at some point the transportation that would cut their journey short by weeks or perhaps months.

They had followed the track for several days. They had seen but one vehicle on the track—and it passed them at a speed not much less than that of sound, the shock wave knocking them flat. If the bullet-shaped vehicle's occupants had seen the travellers or been aware of them, there was no sign of it.

Then the track went underground, disappearing into a tunnel in a hillside. They had not dared follow it further; if a vehicle overtook them in that tunnel their deaths would be instantaneous. Instead they struck out, overland, in the same direction the track had been pointing.

AFTER SEVERAL MORE kilometers of steady march, they found themselves weary enough to call it a day and settle down for a night's rest on the round summit of a hill.

The evening had taken on a hint of a chill, but they saw no wood in the area to fuel a fire; they settled on the

thermo-blankets they'd brought with them, draping the specially treated cloth over their shoulders and squatting down in a small circle to uncoil their tense nerves and muscles before sinking into sleep.

They were discussing their previliges on Earth, when Chaimon, facing east, suddenly sprang up, scuttled excitedly over to the brow of the hill peak, and piped a series of frenzied whoops, his pointing finger directed out across the night-draped hills to the distance.

"We're here!" he cried, beside himself with joy, his long hair flapping animated with the shaking of his head. "It's the space-port! Elton! Vanal! Aaron! Look!"

The others scrambled up, throwing off their blankets, and raced Chaimon's side, peering hard into the dark in the direction the excited one indicated.

Lights.

They were barely distinguishable mere specks of dull brightness in the solid black of the horizon, certainly less intensity than the glittering stars overhead. But the fact that they were lights, bits of white that spoke of some kind of city, some sort of people, was unquestionable. They were not moving as the bright color-like flash of the monorail vehicle had been. They remained steady, though tiny, not wavering or quivering in the least.

The group stared some moment, half expecting the lights to be some sort of mirage that would blink away when their senses returned. But the lights remained, slight yet constant.

"Well," intoned Elton, slowly, without doubt sincerely that those lights belonged to a spaceport. Our instruments, you may remember, affirmed with no doubt that whatever is giving



those energy readings is two thousand kilometers from the lifeship module, and, I'm sorry to say, we have yet to put even a significant dent in that distance. It's a city perhaps—not a spaceport."

Chaimon's excitement seemed to collapse as he realized that Elton was right. Aaron watched the man amble dejectedly back to the campsite and hunker down by his blanket, not even reassuming the warm covering. Aaron considered an attempt to cheer him up, but before the thought could become action, Vana strode past him to Chaimon and bent over, speaking quietly. By the time her words drifted over to the standing men they were muted and meaningless, but Aaron suspected they were similar to what he would have said: that though the city, or whatever, was not the spaceport, its inhabitants were likely to be able to assist the travellers to that place.

He could not know how wrong that assumption was.

All of the group had difficulty sleeping, tossing and turning in half-conscious dreams of salvation from their wearying trek. The outcome of this fitful night was that they all rose early and eagerly lunged into the task of closing the distance between the ill and the source of the lights, which was quite invisible in the morning mist that cloaked the land.

As the huge pale sun burned off the fog, they followed a slope down into a slight valley, then climbed up a lesser incline. When they crested this hill, they were startled at the sight that awaited their eyes in the valley before them. They dawdled on the crest, staring bemusedly down.

In the midst of the expansive, bowl-like valley, was a village.

To look down upon it tickled Aaron's sense of scenic *deja vu*: where had he seen this sight before? It must have been an antique photograph. . . .

It was a cluster of seemingly old, quaint buildings, contentedly hugging the ground. Smoke curled up from a multitude of chimney pots rising out of variously shingled and thatched roofs squatting over wood and brick buildings. Streets crisscrossed among the houses and large buildings; a river slashed through the very middle lazily, bridged here and there to connect the streets on opposite banks.

Figures could be seen moving through the thoroughfares and working the neat squares of the fields girding the town. This outlying area was dotted with barns, speckled with farm animals. It was something out of an old picture book, thought Aaron. Something out of . . .

"Old Europe!" said Vana, hands on hips. She swished her mop of hair in a shake of disbelief, and frowned. "This just should not be here."

"Yeah, yeah—you know, she's right!" burst out Elton. "They've even got a few of these preserved on earth as living museums. It's a goddamn middle-European village ripped right out of anywhere from the Dark Ages all the way up to the twentieth century. You see, they've even got a cathedral." He pointed toward the spired mass of stones that thrust up high above the other buildings. The sun glinted on its stained-glass windows.

"What did we do—go back in time or something?" said Chaimon in a worried whisper.

"Rubbish. Impossible," blared Elton, as though to shield himself from the idea with his loudness. "Uh—this must be just a construct, modeled

after a middle-European village. Obviously!"

Vana gazed down admiringly. "Whatever it is, it's beautiful."

Aaron stopped sucking his lip. "Don't know. I just don't know. It's not right, somehow. Just not right. I've never heard of a colony modeled after such—such a community. And I made it my business to find out what sort of colonies Earth creates. All are at least vaguely modern, fashioned after Earth-life for sure, but current types of architecture. Certainly current agriculture. Never heard or seen pictures of *anything* on colonies like this."

"Me neither," said Elton, lending finality to the matter. "But it obviously exists, and it appears pleasant enough, so I suggest we stop our gawking, go down, and see what's what."

Having thus convinced himself, Elton began his descent. The others followed, Aaron bringing up the rear, still in a haze of astonishment that was not cleared by the discernable change in the environment as they walked down the slope. From bland, slightly acrid heaviness, the air seemed to sweeten and lighten. It seemed invested with familiar Earth smells yet available in secluded sections of that overcrowded planet. Grass, hay, flowers breathed this air, and imbued it with their definite characteristics. And the colors . . . They seemed to shift into alignment with Aaron's sense of *rightness*, away from the off-kilter strangeness that jarred his senses on this otherwise liveable world.

And yet at the same time this new, comfortable naturalness was *unnatural*. After all, a middle European village smack dab in the midst of nowhere on an alien planet. . . ?

THE MAN wore peasant clothes; rough breeches, leather boots, a durable plain brown-wool tunic. A simple round-rimmed hat kept the sun from his eyes. He was plowing a field just below the slope. "Our first contact," Elton said, looking down at the man in the distance. "I'll talk with him."

"Do you really think he'll speak an Earth-derived Galactic?" questioned Vana.

"Standard Galactic is mostly English," noted Aaron.

As they neared, Elton broke away from the party. The yoked ox belled, turned its yellow eyes toward the stranger. The peasant lifted his head, but didn't seem to catch sight of Elton. He returned his attention to the furrow his plow-blade dug in the rich, cool dirt.

"Hullo there!" cried Elton, jogging toward the man, waving his hands. He stopped as the black animal snorted, halted. The others were now meters behind Elton; they slowed their pace.

"Don't scare the beast, Elton," Vana scolded.

The peasant urged the ox onwards. He took no notice of the intruders. Elton halted his gallop, belled up to the man in a jovial manner. "Hey there, fellow. Do you speak Gal-Eng? We're visitors. Definitely friendly. . . ."

Under his straggly blond hair, the man's eyes blinked. He looked about, baffled. Aaron hurried up to Elton's side. "Here now, Elton. Don't bombast the man. We're supposed to be friendly, you know. Have you determined if he speaks English?"

"Something wrong with him," Chaimon said as he joined them. "I think he hears you—but he doesn't seem to see you . . ." He trailed off as the peasant's eyes focused momen-

tarily on him, grew wide with alarm, and then lost him again.

"In God's name, what's wrong. . . ?" said Elton, and the man goggled toward him, blinked, shook his head, began to tremble violently. "Great Mother, preserve me!" Aaron heard him sputter.

"Whōa. Hold on, man," calmed Elton, attempting a reassuring tone. "We don't want to harm you. We just want some help."

The ox, relieved of its burdensome task for a time, munched at a clump of grass. The peasant released the handles of his plow, sunk to his knees in the new-turned soil, gape-jawed, blinking rapidly.

"The guy's having some sort of fit." Aaron moved in toward the peasant, who cringed back and fell into the loam, spasming violently.

## II

"**H**E'S FAINTED," said Aaron, leaning over the peasant.

"Now what could have caused that?" Chaimon said, upset.

"Elton barrelling toward him . . . quite a frightening sight, I dare say," said Vana with bite in her voice.

"No. It wasn't just Elton." Aaron rolled the unconscious man over, checked his mouth to ascertain that his fit had not produced a tongue-swallowing. "It was all of us. Somehow the sight of our group caused the man to break down."

"What a way to start out here!" whined Chaimon.

"Will the sight of us cause a similar effect in the others?" asked Vana. "Why? And what can we do about it?"

"Right now we'd best get this man out of the open," suggested Aaron, eyeing the area. "Over there. That

barn. Chaimon and Elton. Give us a hand."

The barn was deserted. It smelled of hay and animals, and had a dusty dimness. They set the man down carefully on a bed of straw. He was still out.

"Should we try to wake him up?" Elton wanted to know.

Chaimon sat down to rest. "And have the same scene all over again? No thank you."

"What could have frightened him so?" Vana gazed down worriedly at the man. "Do we look that horrible?"

Aaron snapped his finger. Of course! "No! This man is as human as we are—and there's no reason to believe his fellows aren't as well. Our only different aspect? Our clothes!"

Elton snorted. "What—should we parade through town bare-ass?"

"Better than causing this, which for some reason was caused by the sight of our apparel," said Aaron, nodding down at the man. "But that won't be necessary. We've got one set of native clothing right here. Chaimon, fetch me a blanket out of a pack. Elton, help me undress this fellow. I'd let you do this, but you're too big for the clothes. He seems about my size."

"What do you intend to do?" demanded Elton.

"Make contact with this community," Aaron replied. "And see what's going on here."

## THE SMELLY CLOTHES ITCHED.

Trying to ignore the discomfort, Aaron strode through the fields. Before him was another barn. He heard voices, saw men working with horses and cattle. He selected the closest man inside the broad door, and approached him warily.

"Hello, there," Aaron said softly, affably.

The square-jawed, blunt-nosed fellow, who was seated on a stool, milking a cow, angled his head toward the voice, stared directly at Aaron.

Inwardly, Aaron breathed a sigh of relief. Now if only there was no language difficulty.

"Greetings. You don't work here, do you?" said the man, continuing to squirt white jets of milk into the wooden bucket beneath the cow's udder. Aaron could almost smell its creamy froth, taste it in his mouth. Fresh milk. He hadn't had that in a long time.

Chewing its cud, the cow ignored them both.

Aaron swallowed the wetness that had accumulated in his mouth, looking at the milk. "Uh, no sir. I don't work here."

"Sir? I've not heard that word before. A clannish phrase? You from across the river?" The man's tone was relaxed, complacent, unsuspicious.

"Sort of," replied Aaron. "I need to talk to someone about—"

The man stopped milking, gave Aaron a disconcerted gaze. "How come you're talking to me when the forewoman is yonder?" He jerked a wet thumb over his shoulder toward a group of workers, among them a small dark woman. He turned away, leaned back to his milking. "Strange clans, other side of the river," he muttered to himself.

"Thank you." After a friendly nod to the man, Aaron walked over to the woman, who seemed to be directing the storage of straw in the haylofts. Strange thing for a woman to be doing in this sort of community, he thought. As she turned, hearing rustle and crunch of his steps in the scattered straw, he could see she was pregnant.

Her eyes were a dark mauve, friendly in her young face. "You're

not of my work crew," she stated simply, without accusation but in a tone of authority.

"No, I'm not. May I talk to you a moment? I'm afraid I might surprise you—but I do need to speak with someone around here."

"Is there a difficulty?" she asked, pleasantly. She seemed perfectly at ease. Her manner made Aaron feel at ease as well—made him feel as he hadn't felt since he was a child: protected, safe in a maternal sort of way. Very unusual.

"Yes. There is. You see, I need help. I'm a stranger to this community."

She cocked her head sharply. "'Stranger'? What do you mean—'stranger'? All the people of Morningtown are at home, where they belong—under the beneficent wing of the Spirit."

"No—you don't understand. I don't come from this community. I come from beyond." He gestured with his arm, sweeping it in the direction from which they'd come.

Her eyes twinkled. She laughed, and the men stopped their work to determine the cause of her amusement. "This is a joke, I see. Some one has sent you to play a prank. You look material enough. You don't seem to be of the Heavenly Family. I never knew an angel smelled of manure!" She chuckled gaily; the men laughed as well. Aaron could not help but smile. The people here seemed quite at ease amongst themselves. Very friendly and relaxed. "No. No, I quite assure you. I *am* human. I'm from beyond the hills. I have companions. We seem to have frightened a man very badly. We need your help. We *are* friendly, and desire no harm for anyone here."

Her smile faded. The laughter

died. "Very well," she said. "Although I don't believe you, I shall see what the punch-line to this joke is." She turned to the men. "Elias; Jacob! I want the loft fair to bursting with straw when I get back . . . soft enough for a tumble!" She winked at them naughtily, at which they chuckled boisterously and flung themselves back into their task. "Now, lead on, Jokester. This had better be a reasonable laugh."

Aaron led her back to the other barn.

ON THE WAY, Aaron learned that the pregnant woman's name was Marthe. He supplied his own name, which brought a curious expression across her attractive features. "Not a name that I am familiar with."

When she entered the barn behind Aaron, she immediately turned to Vana. "I don't know you," she declared simply. "Why do you wish to make a foolish jest of sending this man, speaking nonsense?" She scanned the party. "And why are you all wearing blankets? And Arthur, too?" She darted Vana a troubled look.

"It's true," Vana confirmed.

Aaron hastily introduced his companions to the disbelieving Marthe, and explained that he had borrowed the unconscious man's clothes.

"But why?"

"Chaimon, please slip off your blanket a moment," Aaron said. He faced Marthe. "Look at him. Tell me what you see."

Brows beetled, she shrugged bemusedly, looked. And blinked. And shuddered. And caught her breath.

"All right, Chaimon. Enough for now."

Obligingly, Chaimon donned the blanket once more, concealing his

clothes from Marthe's sight. The woman staggered, as though dizzy and about to fall. Aaron gripped her arm, led her to an up-ended barrel where he sat her down. "Are you okay?" he asked, concerned. Dammit! He shouldn't have brought a pregnant woman. . . .

"He . . . he flickered!" She was trembling slightly. Vana moved to her side, and abruptly found herself in the woman's tearful embrace. "Sister!" Marthe said. "Did you see him?"

Instinctively, Vana stroked her soft, long hair, comfortingly. She shot Aaron a fierce look. "Did you have to—"

"She'll be all right," Aaron said. Vana's anger pierced unexpectedly deep. "I had to convince her that we are strangers. The people here can't seem to grasp the concept of there being other humans beyond the perimeters of this settlement."

Elton observed, "We can see that there was a similar reaction to the clothing. Presumably, the other villagers would react the same way."

"We'd best watch our step, or they'll kill us all," put in Chaimon. "God knows what sort of people these are."

"I really don't think we have to worry about that," said Aaron. "A single community that has no contact with outsiders and needs no defense will hardly be inclined to organized violence. Besides—I don't know, but from the impression I get, these people . . . well, they aren't that way at all. Inclined toward the use of force, that is."

"You get a human scared, and you can't know *what* to expect," said Elton. "Hey, look. The woman seems to be snapping out of it."

Aaron adjusted his attention back to Marthe, who was gazing at them all,



an odd glint to her eye. "You . . . you are strangers. And physical . . . not from the heavens. You must understand that this is hard to accept. I've . . . My clan, my people, have never entertained the thought before of . . . others."

"When Chaimon removed his blanket, what did you see, Marthe?" Vana prodded encouragingly.

"I saw him in a strange suit," she murmured in a small voice. "And then I didn't see him at all. And then I saw him again, although my mind seemed to be rebelling at the notion of his being there, and then I *didn't* see him—he just winked in and out of existence."

"As I thought. The unusual clothing is definitely the key," remarked Aaron. "We're not going to be able to meet your people in our regular clothes, Marthe. Can you get us some other clothing?"

The woman's bemused expression disappeared as she turned to Vana. "Why do you wish to be in our community at all? I must tell you that I find your presence most disturbing, if you indeed are who you claim to be."

"We are lost," responded Vana in a low, urgent tone. "We seek shelter, a place to rest, and finally, help in proceeding on our journey. In return we are quite willing to answer any questions your people have about us, where we come from, where we are going. Also, if need be, we will work for our keep."

"Hold on, there," protested Elton. "We can't stay here long enough to get involved in all that. We've got to push on the spaceport."

"Spaceport? Another strange word." Marthe stood. "To spare my people the sight of your clothing, I will go into town and obtain what you desire. In turn, you must promise to

come with me to the Council Hall where there may be better minds than mine—ones more able to deal with what you have told me. Our leader will decide how you are to be received. I trust Arthur to your care."

"He's breathing regularly," said Aaron. "I think it's best to wait until we're all in a garb he's accustomed to before we wake him."

Nodding, Marthe turned. "I shall return in a few minutes," she said toneless, and was gone.

AARON found himself surrounded by argument.

"She'll probably come back with soldiers swarming about her," complained Chaimon. "We'll get speared, arrowed, shot, or clubbed."

"Will you *listen* to me, for God's sake!" cried Aaron. "This is *not* that sort of civilization here. I *assure* you. Let's not be at each other's throats, please. We've got better ways to use our time—like trying to figure out why these people have such a violent reaction to the sight of our garb."

Vana made a face. "I don't know—I always considered these khaki space-flight uniforms pretty dull myself. I can't get too excited about them."

Elton rubbed his chin. "The *strangeness* of them to these folks is the key, of course. They've never seen this cut of clothing. . . ."

"Yes, but—" said Chaimon, nervously peering out of a crack in a wood plank that faced the village. "We don't go into fits at the sight of strange clothing, do we?"

"No. It's very odd," murmured Aaron. A suspicion was whispering about in his mind—but he, wanted more time for evidence to accrue before he advanced it in its entirety. As for the cause of the reaction to their clothing, that had only one firm pos-

sibility: "Conditioning. *Must* be. As to what extent or *why* it exists, I can't say right now. Let's wait and get an idea of exactly what kind of society this is, why it's here, and *who's* behind it before we make any declarations."

*I just hope I'm not right*, he added, to himself.

WHEN SHE RETURNED, Márthe was accompanied by two men. Despite Chaimon's fears, they carried clothing rather than weapons.

"I would not have been so long, but there are few men in town of this one's girth." She indicated Elton as she spoke. Directed by her to place the clothing down, the men obeyed, staring at the blanket-clad party with obvious curiosity.

"I think it would be best if we waited outside while you dressed," Márthe continued. "Then we'll be sure that Arthur is all right, and proceed immediately to the Council Room. I have little say in the government, but I've informed a certain relation there of your presence."

"What was the reaction?" asked Vana, kneeling to examine the clothing.

"She doesn't believe me."

THE GARMENTS that Márthe had brought them were a considerable improvement over the rough, peasant clothes Aaron had found so uncomfortable. They were obviously not of the advanced quality of weave and material that made modern clothing so pleasant to wear, he'd noted as he slipped them on. They were obviously animal hair—wool, most likely. But they were reasonably comfortable—and Aaron found a peculiar enjoyment wearing them.

As they approached the main body

of the town he examined the apparel of his comrades. Like himself, Chaimon and Elton were clad in ruffle-chest shirts with bell-like cuffs, tight gray slacks belted with leather, and boots. Chaimon, slim and dapper, cut quite a dashing figure. Elton's clothing was overly tight—it looked rather ridiculous. But they both appeared uncomfortable in the comparatively coarse fabrics; unlike Aaron they'd not had the chance to wear the peasant's clothes and didn't know how well off they were.

Márthe lead them through the streets of Morningtown.

Quite beautiful, this place, thought Aaron as he strode along behind the natives of the community. He felt transported to a more leisurely time as they entered the town limits: hurried back softly to sunnier, happier days. The curious houses that flanked the cobblestone pavement rose up with a quiet, comfortable shabbiness that paid more attention to color and life than to the mechanical precision so much evident in the modern world, led in fashion by Mother Earth. No. This village harked back to days when Man was comfortably nestled between Nature and his ingenuity—the genius that eventually gave birth to technological progress.

Carts clacked. People neither bustled nor hustled, but made their ways to wherever they were bound with little attention to worry or hurry. The air was fresh, scented slightly with river-smell, redolent of the profusion of varied flowers sprouting in grass-green parks, store-front yards, and window-boxes. The general street attire seemed tastefully colorful. And it was curious—the women's dress was no different than the men's: boots, loose flowing slacks, balloon-sleeved blouses. In this the general scene rad-

ically diverged from the evident middle-European model. The garments had no national quality about them—nothing that marks a culture with customs differing from those of surrounding countries.

Too, there was a remarkable sense of cleanliness about the town: swept streets, clear gutters, freshly whitewashed walls. Remarkable. It seemed a singularly happy, settled society.

From our point of view, anyway, Aaron decided.

As the party advanced, they caused no undue notice. Each carried backpacks and these did promote a few stares of wonderment from the populace. Otherwise the townspeople had a business-as-usual quality.

Elton, Vana, and Chaimon seemed as taken with the village as Aaron—perhaps more so. They all wore expressions of interest and pleasure, or relief from the visual tedium and alienness of the planet's rolling plains. Fingers pointed in profusion, calling attention to this doorknob or that milkcart.

"If they don't leave this valley like you say, Aaron, they must get all their wood from that forest on the slope opposite the one we came down," noted Elton.

"That is true," confirmed Marthe without turning. Her voice was frosty.

"Hey—how come the cold shoulder, Marthe?" asked Elton.

"I have difficulty accepting your existence, knowing what I know of you. Your presence is most troubling to me. I'll be quite happy to be rid of you." She said this matter-of-factly, without rancor.

"Rid of us?" echoed Chaimon, bleakly.

"She means of her responsibility—correct, Marthe?"

Marthe's "What else?" brought a

relieved sigh from Chaimon.

"One question, Marthe." Elton strolled up between her and one of the men. Aaron noticed that the man, a stout, husky fellow with an ill-trimmed brown beard and piercing eyes, was gazing at Elton with extreme interest, listening attentively. "What sort of society do you have here that the men allow you to work in your delicate condition?"

"Men allow? Delicate condition?" Marthe lowered eyebrows at him quizzically.

"Yes." With his usual amount of coyness, Elton pointed to her swollen abdomen.

"I am quite healthy, quite strong. There is nothing wrong with my pregnancy," she retorted. "It is approved by the Council. Why should I not work?"

"Forgive me, but that hardly seems a woman's place when there are obviously an abundance of able-bodied, able-thinking men about," Elton said—with a patronizing smile.

Aaron cocked an ear with frank interest for the response to this bald statement by Elton. He burned with curiosity. Just what sort of society was this, anyway? But both of the men merely gave Elton shocked, perplexed looks. Marthe merely ignored the question. Elton shrugged, fell back with his companions.

But brown-beard shot a guarded glance back at them. And in the fraction of a second that their eyes met, Aaron perceived a thoughtful look in his expression.

It was a tall, broad building, belted with trimmed hedges and grassy yards. The arched front windows gleamed with the late morning sun peeking past the swollen, off-color clouds.

Marthe dismissed the men on the carved-stone steps, telling them to wait for her outside. She guided the party through the double-doored entrance. They pounded down a wood-floored corridor, and she halted them in front of a door framed with intricate carved decorations. "Hold here a moment," she instructed. "I'm not entirely sure of protocol in this matter. Besides, I'd best prepare my contact here for what awaits her."

Easing the door open, she stepped through. Aaron got a glimpse of a larger, wood-paneled room, a peek of desks and chairs, a short moment of echoey whispers. And then the door clunked shut behind her.

There was a clean scent of antique wood about the place. The faint sunbeams slanting through the arched windows caught the dance of dustmotes. The building interior was covered in the austere, velvety silence that seemed to always accompany the places of administration Aaron had visited. An ominous, intimidating air of authority . . .

"Damn, I'm hungry," complained Elton. "Why didn't we ask for some food?"

"We've had other things besides our stomachs to consider in the past few hours, Elton," Vana said tartly as she pondered the structure of the wall. But Elton's declaration awoke Aaron's own hunger pangs; he felt his stomach gurgle demandingly. Chaimon chimed in, stating he was hungry as well.

Aaron couldn't help but chuckle. "Well, we must all be a little less tense if we can pay attention to this sort of subject. I dare say these people are reasonably friendly, and we can expect lunch. I don't think we'd better root around in our packs just now."

The chamber door angled open. A stern voice spoke. "But you *know* that men are *not* allowed in the Council Hall—not even the corridor. These are the rules, sister." The voice's owner was holding the door open. She gazed at the men with a severe frown. Her hair was a shiny gray, clipped short, draped artlessly over a wrinkled brow above wide-spaced dull eyes. Her mouth was tight with displeasure.

"I thought it advisable, considering the situation," responded Marthe tersely. "Considering their claims, which I have seen evidence to support. I've already told you the whole story. I realize it's difficult to believe. But I'd advise you not to make them wear those bizarre suits of theirs."

The older woman—fiftyish? wondered Aaron—settled pale hazel eyes on them appraisingly. "Why do you persist in this charade?" she demanded in a gritty voice. "What clan is shamed by having given you life?"

"No clan of this community," ventured Elton hastily with a slick, hopeful, diplomatic smile. "We come from—"

Her voice thundered authoritatively. "Silence! What gall, to speak in behalf of your group when its obvious leader is present." She eyed Vana, and clucked. "You keep little order amongst your crew, woman?"

Taken aback, Vana muttered something about hardly being the leader of the party, nor particularly relishing that position, which caused the harsh features of the questioning woman to soften into surprise. And something like alarm, observed Aaron.

"These *are* strange people," she murmured, licking the corner of her lips as she looked back at Marthe. "And you claim their original clothing produced eerie, magical effects?"

Marthe nodded sagely, enjoying her elder's apparent discomfort.

The older woman returned her gaze to Vana. "You also have strange names. And unusual manners of speech. I am Hildegarde. I'm a distant cousin of this woman who brought you here, and frankly I thought her mind addled when she came to me and told me about you. It is evident that this is indeed a matter for the Council, of which I am a member. Therefore, I will permit you to enter. You will leave your baggage outside the door. With the exception of Vana, you will not speak unless you are directly questioned. I am risking much displeasure by allowing you inside, but this is my decision. Come then."

Briskly, she turned, her brown robe fluttering as she walked.

"Good luck," said Marthe with a hint of a smile in her eye.

"You won't be coming with us?" Vana looked uncomfortable.

"Hildegarde has my story—there's no reason to. If I'm needed, I'll be called later." She nodded politely, then strode away.

They slipped off their backpacks, set them in a pile to the side of the door, and walked into the chamber, Vana first.

Chaimon and Elton looked a trifle bemused. But Aaron, bringing up the rear, kept all expression from his face.

He was fairly positive now what sort of society this was, and it fascinated him.

THIS CHAMBER reminded him of pictures from history tapes he'd viewed. Aaron absently noted the ostentatious trappings of the round, high-windowed room: the brocaded curtains, the embroideries dangling from wooden rafters, the majestic designs

of the furniture. It owned the air of importance all seats of government of older cultures had about them in societies where power needed to be splendidous, . . . self-perpetuating. Hardly the endlessly computer-augmented bureaucracy of modern Earth—a kind of mechanistic democracy by default that gave individuals what they wanted but pretty much specified exactly what those wants should be. No—this was probably a government set up to serve the society, rather than the dog-wagging tail of the political system back home. But at least one had the option of bailing out there—spacing to some far-off colony where things could be expected to be reasonably different.

Earth. Frederick 201—the colony to which they'd been headed. They were light-years away from both now, on a world that puzzled Aaron as much as it frightened him.

Hildegarde directed them to a bench, instructed them to wait for the present members of the Council to convene to hear out this special problem. Some twenty persons—women all, of various ages—lounged about in various attitudes, until they began to notice the party being brought in and seated on the bench. This stirred a commotion. Voices buzzed, heads turned, startled eyes stared. They all wore brown pleated robes, which seemed to be the uniform of their office.

As she strode amongst them, Hildegarde was openly barraged with questions, some quite outraged. Aaron caught snatches of blurted phrases: ". . . in the chambers of the Council?", "What are they doing here?" "Men?"

"They don't seem too pleased about us being here," noted Elton. Chaimon moved restlessly on the

(cont. on page 92)



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# FAR FROM EVE AND MORNING

**TOM MONTELEONE**

*Like Tom Monteleone's last story for us, "Good and Faithful Servant" (March, 1976), this is a Chicago story, a "prequel" in fact to "Chicago," which appeared in Future City in 1973. The Chicago series will be published in book form by Popular Library as The Time-Swept City (the publisher's new title).*

**Illustrated by RICHARD OLSEN**

**S**HAFTS OF SUNLIGHT danced on the choppy surface of the lake. Beyond its broken brightness lay the City—a clutch of spires and spheres, tesseraets and towers. It was like a Mondrian painting of three-dimensional geometrics, reaffirming itself through color and light. Miria studied its random compositions from the vantage point of the flivver which skimmed tantalizingly above the whitecaps, rushing towards the IASA Installation twenty kilometers offshore.

The Installation was an impressive sight in itself, and although dwarfed in size by Chicago, it still sprawled across the surface of the lake like a floating city. An immense platform of concrete and exotic alloys, punctuated by gracefully curving ramps, soaring control towers, and an occasional thicket of atmospheric ships poised on thin legs like insects. Somewhere on the platform, thought Miria, was a shuttle that would be taking Alen up to the starship.

Today was the day she could finally

see him again. All the tests and training and conditioning programs had been run and the final selections for the crew had been made. Alen had called her earlier in the day, at the City's monstrous Information Retrieval Complex, where she had been cataloguing and encoding a Rimbaud anthology for the crystal databanks. He still did not know when he would be leaving.

The flivver gravled up to the quay and passengers began to rise from their seats. Miria slipped into the flow, raising her ID bracelet as they passed through the Security portal leading into the terminal. From there, she sought out a routing display and selected the necessary sequence of walks that would carry her to the astronaut's residence sector. As she rode the walks, she self-consciously adjusted her gown—an organically cultured film that flowed liquidly over her body, reflecting a diffused lime-tinted light. She wore her blonde hair long and loose because she had seen pictures of

Dante Rosetti's women and they had looked like that. She paid little attention to the 'daily-changing fashions of the City, and at times she honestly believed she would have been a happier woman in the Nineteenth Century.

Reaching the residence sector, she was again cleared by Security and admitted into the maze of corridors and intersecting elevator shafts. His suite was twelve levels beneath surface and the elevator, although descending rapidly, seemed slow when paced against her anxieties. She found his door quickly and palmed the lock, he having already coded it for her heat-signature. Alen was seated in a contour chair—a mock antique of the early Twentieth. His face was squarish, lips thin, eyes wide apart and green-flecked gold. He was wearing a functional robe and the illumination from the uncoded wall-screens cast an even, dull glow across his depilated skull. If Miria looked closely she could see the marks left by the implants and the sensors.

Alen stood up and greeted her with a smile.

"I came as fast as I could," she said. "The crowds were thick during the change of shifts."

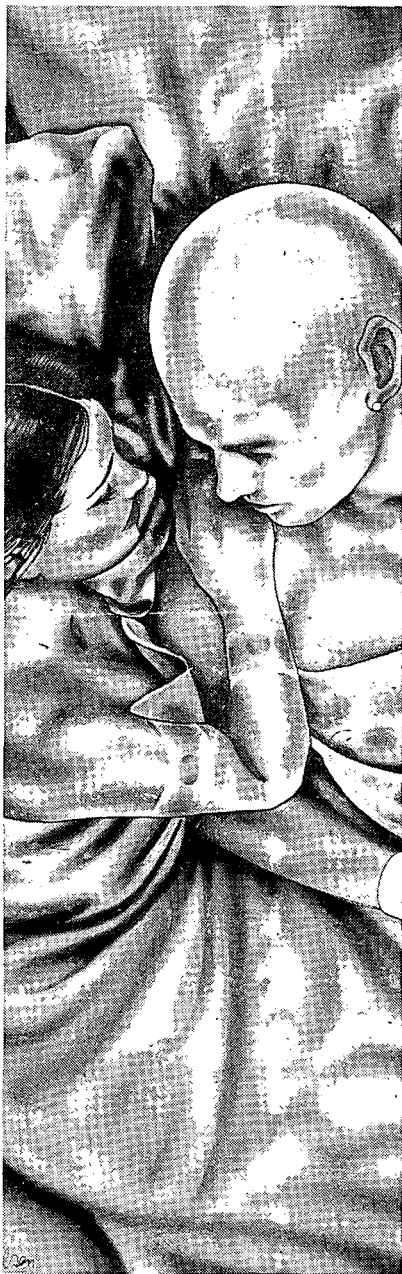
"It's all right. I was resting. Sit down."

She joined him on a couch covered with ersatz leather. "When?"

He shook his head. "I'm not sure. There will still be time, though. The selection of the passenger list, the specialists, and the construction crews will take a long time. Don't forget, all the people who are chosen will have to be replaced somewhere in the system."

Miria nodded. "Have they selected the star?"

"Not exactly. The ship is going to



the Central Cluster. Lots of star-systems to choose from there."

Miria thought of the great ship rushing through the emptiness with the whole universe as a backdrop, carrying a ragged piece of humanity to an unknown fate. It was both a beautiful and a terrible vision. "When I think about it, it's hard to believe it's really going to happen. There's such a finality about it, Alen."

The astronaut shook his head, frowning. "What else can we do? Everywhere you look, there's nothing but dead-ends for us here. We've been to all the planets and back for more than a century now. There's nothing out there, except those things on Jupiter, and after seventy years, we *still* can't be sure whether or not they're even sentient."

"But just for the sake of exploring . . . of expanding. I mean, is that all the reason there is?"

"Miria, we've been through this before. I've been created to be an astronaut. I never really had a choice. No one ever does, *you know* that. I was made to spend my days out there. If they want me to go to the stars, I go."

She looked at him for a long time before saying anything. His ruddy complexion was creased and burned and he looked far older than he actually was. And his eyes looked older still. She could sense something lurking behind his eyes that intimated thoughts other than what he had said. "That's not all, Alen. I can tell. I know you."

"You know a lot of people have had enough down here," he said softly, evenly, as though he was angry with her.

Miria could only nod her head. She herself was a sympathizer of several underground organizations that

advocated less technology and less control over the individual lives of the Citizens. She knew that since all the powers of the Western hemisphere had formed the loosely-connected alliance, the NorAm Confederation the security of mankind had become less stable instead of more secure. The rise of antiquarian fashions and nostalgic flirtations were more than just a society's cyclic turns. It was no coincidence that the number of "flyers"—those who simply walked away from their assignments, their homes, their friends, and disappeared, presumably to join the small villages and agricultural regions that still clung to the earth despite the rise of the Mega-cities—had significantly increased year by year for more than a generation.

"There's a lot of free spirits here, said Alen, as if he could touch her thoughts. "It's natural, I guess, among the bunch that's been . . . away from the Earth. It's different out there. There's a freedom you feel that just doesn't exist down here."

"It's not going to get any better," she said. "The Confederation is a joke. I keep having the feeling that another war comes, it's going to be everyone for themselves."

"Why not? Look at the cities—they're getting to be like little nation states themselves."

"The Greeks," she said, pausing.

"What?"

"The Greeks, the same thing happened to them. They were a fascinating race, you know. Talking about the power of the atom thousands of years ago, writing philosophies that are still viable. And yet they splintered themselves up into little city-states, even had wars amongst themselves."

"Well, we haven't come to that yet," said Alen, forcing a smile to his

ips. It was a pathetic gesture.

"No, but it could happen. And we're not going to be able to stop it if it does."

"We can stop it, Miria. Even if only by walking away from it. What would we be losing? What will I be losing? The possibility of having even more freedoms taken away? Did you know they're playing with the idea of predicting deviants? You know, screening us all at particular developmental stages to see if we're falling into any patterns that will lead to criminal behavior?"

"What? Alen, that's ridiculous."

"I'm sure that's exactly what people said when they talked about genetically designing whole classes of people, too." He stood up and turned away from her, his hands were clenched into fists and the back of his naked neck was flushed.

"Where did you hear about it?" She didn't want to continue the thread of the conversation if it was going to upset him, but her curiosity compelled her to do so.

"There's a lot of cybernetic people at the Installation, Miria. Consultants, specialists, designers, even techs. They all get around. You know, crosstalk between the computer people over in Central. They're working on all sorts of things you wouldn't believe. Sooner or later, true Artificial Intelligence will be a reality. Machines that are no longer merely machines. Machines that can *really* think, not just carry out a chain of commands."

Alen pulled the robe more tightly around him, began pacing across the thick carpet. "One of the techs was talking to me just a few days ago, while I was finishing up my course work, and he tells me that he's been assigned to a new project already, as

soon as our ship leaves. Seems like he's going to be trying to dream up better ways of keeping the population satisfied with their lives."

"That sounds like a psychologist's work, not a cybernetic man."

"Perhaps. Frankly, these guys scare the shit out of me. It sounds like more kinds of *control*, Miria. And control, means infringing upon our freedom."

"Freedom's an illusion," she said. "Nobody's really free."

"The 'flyers' are free. I will be free." The words were spoken with a sneer, as if they could be insulting and condescending.

She only looked at him unsure of how to interpret what he meant.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that," he said, reading her confused, half-hurt expression. "I didn't mean it to sound like I wasn't including you."

"Alen, I want to be with you." She reached out and took his hand.

"I know you do." He kissed her forehead as she leaned against him.

"What are the chances?"

"It depends upon how many people apply for the berths. I don't know. There's a lot of factors. Age, skills, value to the City, scores on the performance and aptitude tests, lots of things. I think they'll be pretty selective."

"I haven't even applied yet," she said. "I didn't want to commit myself until I knew, for sure that you were going to be in the crew."

"I'll talk to Hast in the morning. He's one of the IASA Class Ones on the project. His jurisdiction is only for the crew, but he might be able to tell if there's anybody I can talk to about the passenger and colonist list."

"Do you really think that would make any difference, Alen? I mean,



there's so little human judgment involved. Isn't that the supposed 'beauty' of the whole project—the pure objectivity of it all?"

"You're worrying about it too much. Stop thinking about it until you have to. Key in an application tomorrow and wait until they've started testing you." He lifted her chin gently, then kissed her.

"You're right, I'm sorry. I must sound like an old woman."

"That's pushing things a bit." He smiled.

"Do you have to stay here again tonight?"

"Yeah, but only to check out in the morning. The program's over."

"So do I have to wait until tomorrow night, or do you think they wouldn't mind me staying awhile?" she said with a mischievous grin.

Alen smiled. "Oh, I don't think they'd mind at all."

Miria stood up, glided across the room towards his sleeping quarters, her hand at the clasp of her gown.

**I**N THE MORNING Alen accompanied her back to the City, he to their shared con-apt, she to her assignment at the Library Complex—the Information Retrieval Center. The structure was a black monolith, featureless and polished, dark as the midnight; and although it was surrounded by even taller buildings, it loomed large and impressive. Deep within its corridors, Miria returned to Rimbaud and his magical, twisted lines of sound and sense. She loved the poetry of the earlier ages, especially the mystical and the romantic schools. It was through the influence of Shelley, Coleridge, Byron, and their associates that Miria had come to terms with her own perceptions of the world. She learned to see things as others

had when the world was a calmer place, when there was more beauty in the world.

But it was D. H. Lawrence who taught her of love, the forgotten pleasures of physical love. Through his poems and his haunting, darkly sensuous stories, she imagined a world of people who were *alive*, who knew they were alive, and who knew how to celebrate that aliveness.

She had met Alen when both of them were living in a Pre-Assignment Sector, where the Learning Conditioning Complexes were found where the elite classes attended the Multiversity Complex, where young minds were shaped and bodies trained. And they spent several years of learning to know each other, taking the time, when few still did, to give of themselves in order to receive from the other. Although they did not know it at the time, they were somehow different from the others.

It was not until she was older that Miria realized how different she was. Perhaps it was the sheer size of the City, perhaps it was the autonomous character of the technology which subconsciously molded their world but whatever the reason, the Citizens were losing touch with each other. Chicago was a bright and shining place filled with moving, shadowy figures. It was an isle of deadened souls who touched nothing and would not be touched. Miria had never grown accustomed to an age where people thought only of themselves.

Whenever she was assigned a poet to datalogue, she always took the time to read his work. She always took the time to think of Alen. She *would* be with him when he left for the stars. Any other future was unthinkable.

And so she applied to the various agencies that must approve her for

the colony ship. She spent hours in front of a terminal keying in a thousand requests, a thousand data-codes, a thousand references and cross indexes, all of which pooled together somewhere within the crystal-banks of the Central Computer Complex and described the being called Miria. After a week of this, she was called in for a battery of real-time examinations and tests.

Finally she was to be interviewed by an IASA official.

Miria sat quietly in an office of contemporary decor; walls were illuminated with holographic vistas of the cityscape. Although the view was impressive, to Miria it was indicative of a dull, uninspired mind. She, for instance, never dialed up contemporary scenes in her own conapt. She was thinking of the magnificent view of Castle Tintagel she currently enjoyed at home when a panel slid open and the official entered the room.

He was tall and thin, very pale, looking very air-conditioned and unreal. He wore an Agency uniform that was functional in its simplicity. His eyes were grey and seemed to be unfocused even as he looked at her and spoke.

"Miria Soltan?" he said, as he seated himself behind the desk and punched in a terminal, studying its display.

She was startled for a moment—it was very rare that anyone used her referent name—and paused before answering affirmatively.

"My name is Singh. I'm sorry to have to call you in like this, but there were some questions the Agency would like to have answered that did not seem to correlate on any of our tests

"You mean you don't interview all

the applicants?"

Singh grinned feebly. "No, no. Of course not. There's not enough time. No reason, either. The machines do a nice job screening out the unacceptables."

"Oh, I see."

"Now, your Assignment is in the IRC, you are a dataloguer."

"That's right."

"And yet you wish to be a member of the colony ship? In what capacity?"

Miria sensed the condescension in his voice, but chose not to react against it. "I thought I made that clear on the application program. If as nothing else, as a laborer. Or a breeder."

Singh nodded. "Yes, that's what you have keyed in here. But, tell me, Soltan, what do you mean by a 'laborer'? Or a 'breeder'?"

"If the ship finds a new world, there will be years of primary work to be done. A settlement would have to be built, the territory mapped, the agriculture established, you know—a million things. Surely there must be some simple work I could do. And then there are future generations, I could be a mother."

"That's very quaint. But not very realistic. You are not going to be riding in a conestoga wagon, however. There will be machines to do the 'labor' as you must realize. And if the only thing you want is to contribute to the gene pool, we can arrange to have your germ plasma included among the ship's eugenic stores."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying that although your reasons for wishing to be on the ship are wholly unacceptable, we found the specific oddness of your reasons required a personal interview."

"You mean I cannot go?" Miria felt a flash of heat throughout her body.

There was thickness in her throat, a numbness in her skull.

"Soltan, your skills as a dataloguer are hardly needed on a colony ship. *No one* on board is being selected merely for their physical labor characteristics. *No one* will be bearing children on the colony world."

She felt tears in the corners of her eyes, but she sat rigidly in the chair, fighting them back. "Then why did you call me in here? Why didn't you just flash the rejection across my terminal? Why did you have to . . . humiliate me like this?"

"Our records indicate that you have been cohabiting with an astronaut—a one Alen Kinert. Our records also show that you have remained with Kinert for a period of *five years*. Is this correct?"

Suddenly the tears lay drying on her cheeks and she felt indignant rage. "Yes, it is correct! There's nothing illegal in that, is there?"

Singh smiled weakly. "Oh, no, of course not. Although I would say it's a bit peculiar, wouldn't you?"

"What?" Miria looked at him.

"Astronaut Kinert is a member of the starship crew. The reason you wish to be among the colonists is your desire to be with Kinert," said Singh. It was not a question.

"Is there something wrong with that?" Miria had lost his train of thought, his thread of logic.

"Wrong? No. Odd? Very, *I'd* say, *Why*, Soltan? Why would you be willing to throw away a high-level Assignment to face hell-knows-what out there. Just to be with another person? It doesn't add up."

"I'm sorry but it's true," she said simply, bowing her head. When Singh did not immediately reply, she felt the urge to explain herself, to attempt to describe the relationship

she and Alen enjoyed. But she knew there was no use in that. What for? Would it make things any different? She knew that it would not. No, the decision had long ago been made that she would not ride the starship. Alen would be taken away from her and she would never see him again. It was that simple, that cruelly simple.

"I see," said Singh finally. "Then why did you not state this . . . involvement with Kinert as your motivation for joining the mission?"

Miria looked up at the pale man. "Because I knew it would not be a sufficient reason. I knew it would draw the exact kind of surprise and disbelief that you are showing me."

Singh smiled. "Yes; well, at least you seem to have things in proper perspective. I'm sorry that your application has been rejected, I really am. But you must realize, this selection process is a difficult one. The starship was not one of the contingencies in the Eugenics program of the last two generations. There were *no* Citizens specifically bred for colonization. That meant that everyone would have to be pulled from existing Assignments and that the qualifications for the crew and passenger list would have to be very carefully screened. I'm sure you understand this, and the Agency would like to thank you for your interest and willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the mission."

Singh stood up and extended his hand. Shaking it automatically, Miria said nothing and turned away quickly. Her only thought was that she wanted to get away from the place as quickly as possible.

**A**LEN met her at a Rapids terminal and they rode above the Traffic lanes towards the West. The vehicle grew

less crowded at every stop as they approached the terminus of the line. They frequently rode the Rapid to the extreme limits of the City, beyond which was the land of the Confederation Preserves set aside for the vast agricultural complexes.

Stepping down from the station, they rented an electricar and passed beyond a checkpoint onto one of the monitored highways. Alen transpired the windows and they both stared out into the immense emptiness of the agricultural plains. The sky was a swirl of dusk-colors: purple, grey, burnt orange. In the distance the undulating grain was occasionally punctuated by the great shadowy shape of a foodprocessor wading through the crops like an all-devouring baast.

Alen looked at Miria, started to speak, and then checked herself. They had spoken very little on the Rapid. Neither of them seemed to know what to say. Something alien had come between them, something which sought to defeat their intimacy.

Alen had keyed in coordinates that were familiar to both of them. Three years before, they had discovered some rolling countryside which looked down upon a verdant river-valley beyond the agricultural preserve. Several anachronistic villages lay sleepily there and farming was done without food processors. As the car sped silently towards that spot, Alen leaned back and looked at her. "We should count our blessings, actually," he said, trying to smile.

"What do you mean?"

"Someday, I'll bet that people won't even be able to do this, to leave the City like this."

"Why not?"

"Lots of reasons. It might get too dangerous. Or they might finally get

around to building those force-fields, the energy domes."

"God, I hope not."

"It might be the only way to survive an all-out war. They might be forced to do it."

"Alen, that doesn't matter anymore," she said as she turned and looked angrily at him. Her eyes were glistening and she could feel a cold moisture in the palms of her hands.

"No, I suppose it doesn't," was all he could say, sensing her desperate bitterness.

"How long will it take? How long before you get there?"

"You mean ship-time? Or down here?"

"Either. Both, I guess."

"It all depends upon whether or not the ship will be able to maintain a one-gravity acceleration. It could take between fifty and one hundred years—ship-time.

"Fifty to a hundred years? But Alen, you'd be—"

"Dead? No. The crew will be in coldsleep for most of the voyage, just like the colonists. We'll all be revived for short maintenance shifts on a rotating basis. I probably won't be awake for more than six or seven years." He reached out and took her hand, squeezing it tightly.

"And . . . how much time will pass here?"

"A long time, Miria."

"How long?"

"Cose to a hundred thousand years," he said, looking into bottomless blue eyes.

Miria looked away from him, through the car's windows at the Preserve where great splashes of an impressionistic color waved in the wind. A hundred thousand years, she thought. What would this all be like then? What would it be like? It was

doubtful that man would last that long. She thought briefly about that far future when Alen would have aged only a few years, when even the dust of her bones would no longer remain. A shudder ran through her, a feeling of vast emptiness, as she contemplated her non-existence. And she thought of how unfair the universe could be, how insensitive and seemingly without purpose life appeared.

She did not speak for what seemed like a long time. Alen, sensing her state of mind, respected her silence and did not intrude, until at last the car reached its coordinates, rolling to a gradual stop.

Opening the doors, he led her out to a grassy knoll which overlooked the Preserve. Beyond it, through the shifting light of dusk, she could see the City, looking like a tiny formation of amethyst crystals growing randomly across a mossy cavern floor.

"From here, it does not seem so imposing," said Alen softly, his voice dying quickly in the evening air.

"Everyone should see it like this. Perhaps the City would be different then."

"I've felt the same thing in space. Out there, you see the Earth differently. The stars can do strange things, too."

"I remember reading about a man named Link," said Miria, as she lay on her back, watching the stars blink into view as the last shards of day shattered and lay scattered across the far horizon.

"A famous story," said Alen. "He was one of the first starship pilots. They were experimenting with cyborgs back then. When they brought him in, he was crazy as a rat."

"What happened to him?"

"He eventually recovered, I think. That was back when the Government still exhibited some care over its heroes. They learned a lot from Link. No more cyborgs, they said. And they meant it for awhile."

"What do you mean?"

"There's talk of cyborg technology making a comeback. Maybe not for starflight, but other things."

"It sounds horrible."

"I'm sure it is. They say that you become more than a man, but some say that you become much less."

She reached out and touched his face, pale and graven in the stark half-shadows of the starlight. "I love you, Alen. I love you very much."

He nodded but did not reply. He must have known what she was thinking. Thinking that soon she would never see him again, that she would be left in a place that seemed to live without love, and did not seem to suffer from its absence.

And then he was kissing her, touching her, bringing her body to life and warmth in the chill of the evening. It was fitting that they should spend one of their last times together in this place; she remembered the sweetness of the first time they had come there. She had been so young, and yet so full of the dreams like the poets, of the reveries of the past, and she had seduced him like Salome, like Cleopatra, like Helen, like the unnamed lover of Housman's Shropshire.

Afterwards, she lay in his arms, smelling the sweetness of his sweat, feeling the warmth of his legs entwined in hers, trying not to think of a future beyond that moment. She would have been satisfied to never speak another word to him. There was nothing to say that would better express the love which she gave him



that night. The silence comforted her, warmed her, and she was almost upset when Alen broke it.

"There's a way," he said softly into her ear. "There's a way, Miria."

"What? What are you talking about?" She looked up at him and saw that he was smiling.

He sat up, draping his shirt over her shoulders, pulling her close to him. "The answer's so plain, so obvious, I should have realized it before."

"What do you mean? Tell me, Alen."

And he did.

**T**HE PREPARATIONS and the bureaucratic entanglements seemed endless, but Alen, by virtue of his Class One status and his connections at the Installation, was able to push through the impediments, circumvent the barricades. And so he stood by Miria's bed deep within the leveled City, so deep, that there were only a handful of levels beneath them, down where the great fusion reactors generated the limitless quantities of plasma energy which powered the City.

"The shuttle doesn't leave for three days yet," said Miria. "Why must I be here now? There's still time, Alen."

He smiled and shook his head. "Don't talk about time, now. We have enough of that. Besides, I have a million hours of briefings before lift-off. My three days will be like a thousand. I wouldn't have been able to see you anyhow."

"Will you stay with me until . . . until the end?" She reached out from beneath the liquid-like sheet and sought his hand.

"Of course. Of course I will. They'll be coming soon. Don't worry."

"Does it hurt? Will I feel it? Will I know anything?"

He shook his head. "I've been through it during the training. Nothing to it."

"I can still be scared, can't I?"

"You can be anything you want to be," he said, smiling.

The sound of a door irising open behind him heralded the approach of two technicians. They nodded stiffly to Alen and began rolling Miria's bed toward the other end of the room where another door hissed open at their approach. She listened for his footsteps and, knowing that he followed, she felt more secure.

She was taken into a larger room whose walls reflected the illumination of several consoles and databoards. Someone peeled the sheet from her naked body. She felt instantly cold and exposed and very vulnerable. A machine was lowered close to her. There was a humming sound and the device slowly passed over her length, leaving her flesh dancing lightly on the edge of numbness. Then she was lifted from the bed and passed into a container that was transparent and rectangular except for the underside, which was soft and made of a material that conformed to the shape of her body. She felt drowsy and listless and her limbs heavy. Somewhere in the mists that seemed to be swirling up into her mind, she grasped for the image and the thought of Alen. She wanted to touch him once more, to tell him one more time . . .

Turning her head was the greatest effort, but she accomplished this and saw him standing beyond the ranks of the technicians. He seemed to be moving, wavering, shimmering. But she told herself that this could not be so; it must be the effect of the process. She tried to speak, but that power was lost to her and she felt an ache beneath the numbness that was

(cont. on page 91)

*With this final novella we complete the publication of All These Earths which began in 1973 in the now-defunct If with "Pearsall's Return" and continued here with "Search" (December, 1976) and "Nobody Home" (last issue). (The book will be published by Berkley-Putnam.) We rejoin Jay and Raelle Pearsall in space, after their departure from the planet, Nobody Home, whose name had proved all too accurate. Marooned by Drift from their own reality lines, the Pearsalls must now confront new problems, not the least of which is the fundamental nature of Drift itself, for they have Drifted farther than anyone before them and threaten to become—*

# NEVER SO LOST . . .

F. M. BUSBY

Illustrated by STEVE FABIAN

**T**WO DAYS OUT from the planet, Jay leveled *Search* off at a Skip Factor of ten-fourth. With "normal" drive—the thrusters—held down to a tenth of Limit, the small Courier Can was doing a thousand cees. He turned to Raelle—she checked the indicators and nodded.

"You guessed right," he said. "Our Krieger-range sensors handle this much speed, just fine—we can take the same kind of path the big ships use, but faster."

She pushed her brown hair back—a recent trimming left it just short of her shoulders. "I'm glad. Because it's a good idea—checking on Drift with another colony, on the way home. And going outside the Arm twice would be wasteful."

"Right." He flipped a switch. On an auxiliary screen a star map lit. "Mossback's easier. But Waterfall's longer settled—there's a safer chance

it's colonized on this timeline. Still agreed?"

Again she nodded. Looking at his wife without really seeing her, Jay Pearsall thought about Drift—and how, with their Skip unit suppressing all but every ten-thousandth of their normal appearances in the quantized Universe—it moved them into parallel continua. It was to minimize that Drift—to shift from their own time line as little as possible—that he and Raelle traveled merely at high Kreiger speeds and not the Courier Can's potential of over Skip ten-sixth: one million.

Finding a supposed colony planet uninhabited—then the months spent toiling for survival and salvaging bits of fuel from the lethal pile some unknown ship had left—finally winning free of the aptly-named world, Nobody Home—these things had shaken the assurance with which they



had first joined the Courier Service.

Now Jay said, "We haven't discussed this—when we get to Earth, do we settle for what we find and drop out of Couriers?"

Steadily she looked at him. "Whether your parents are there, or not? Jay—I went looking for *me*, and found me. I'm satisfied. You didn't find parents who knew you. What if you don't?"

Jay needed a moment to phrase his thought. "On Earth-one, where we started, I couldn't accept being orphaned at sixteen. On Earth-two last year, Woody and Glenna were alive but *I* hadn't been born." He smiled at her. "Somehow that's a long time ago. I'm twenty now or maybe closer to twenty-one—I've lost track—and *you're* my life. Sure, on whatever Earth we hit I'd like to find Woody and Glenna. But if not—well, just knowing they *are* alive on some of the infinities of Earths—that's good enough."

She reached to touch his shoulder. "Just so you're sure, Jay."

"I think I am."

*Search's* cabin, nearly a third of it now walled off for food storage, looked odd. The "space locker" worked well; Jay had relocated insulation from the hull, to shield it. Now their kills and harvest from Nobody Home, gathered over the months, lay preserved by cold and vacuum. Simple controls allowed them to close the hull and open the locker; by agreement they ate the planet's produce first, saving what remained of their issued rations. As Raelle had said, "Once we land, the locker's out of business—we can't open it or everything will start to spoil."

In other ways as well, *Search* was supplied for a longer time in space

than Courier Cans were expected to need. Their fuel bin was filled—the reclaimed tailings from Nobody Home topped off with purer fuel synthesized by the full-sized ship that had come there—but the ship *Star Flame* had also provided and filled an auxiliary bin.

Jay wondered—*will those three survivors, out of two dozen, get that ship back to Earth? And to which Earth?* Certainly, he and Raelle would never know.

MORE THAN two weeks to Waterfall—at usual Can speeds it would have been perhaps four days, with most of that time spent in leaving and reentering the Galactic arm. At any rate, they were conserving fuel—though when some of the "wild" batches went through the hell-box, Skip Factor jumped erratically.

At last Waterfall's suns could be distinguished. The planet circled—almost exactly, with very slight eccentricity—the smaller of two widely-separated components. The larger was too young and too hot to support a habitable planet. When the Can's sensors reported the planet itself, Raelle said, "Cross your fingers—we don't *need* the colony this time, but I do hope it's there!"

And soon—squinting against the farther sun's diffuse glare as Skip Factor lessened and the universe slowed to its proper, imperceptible motion—Jay saw on Waterfall the signs of man's intrusion. He flashed a reference chart on the side screen, checked briefly and said, "It fits the map pretty well—we're not far from the Earth-two timeline."

"Good. You have all the controls?"

At his nod, Raelle rose from her own seat and console, took a step and stretched. "I'll break out some food.

Before we get there, we need a meal."

INSTEAD of a computer-generated response, Jay's identification signals brought a human voice—but no picture—from below.

"Your ID category isn't registered here. Repeat, please." He did so. After a pause the voice resumed. "You're a new one on us—we have no two-person ships listed. That's all right—land according to the beacon signal and you can tell us about it later. Estimated time?"

Jay checked his indicators and gave the reading; the unseen speaker approved. Jay cut the circuit and tuned to the beacon.

In leisurely fashion he and Raelle ate. "That's the last of the tubers," she said. "I've managed to jam most of what's not sealed into standard refrigeration. The rest of what's in the space locker we'll have to eat up fast, once down, or throw it out."

"Maybe we can invite some of the locals to sample what grows on Nobody Home."

She grinned. "There's a thought. And some of the berries—if we can get the seeds planted, maybe they'll grow here."

"Or on Earth, for that matter. So let's save some, shall we?"

Then it was time to match the planet's velocity and prepare to land. Jay had scanned the data on this colony—he knew it occupied a lowland strip at the west of the mountainous equatorial continent. But the maps and figures had not prepared him for the sheer mass of those mountains, or for the size and number of the rivers that plunged down them to the sea. "Now," he said, "I see why they named it Waterfall."

THE BEACON signalled them toward the northern end of the lowlands, about a fourth of the way from that tip and back only a short distance from the ocean. The shoreline was approximately at midmorning. When they were close enough that the planet became "down" to them, Jay pointed out the difference between mountain and lowland flora—the bluish tinge of mountain foliage shaded to a brighter green as the terrain flattened.

Raelle took the landing. "The port," she said, "seems to have a town of its own—not like Harper's Touchdown, where colony and port administration were all lumped together."

"This colony's been here a while and drawn fairly heavy immigration—it's spread out more. I think the capital's about halfway down the coast—or was, to begin with, at least."

"We'll see." The beacon's directional and altitude signals continued to guide and report—eventually Raelle brought *Search* down to rest overshadowed by two full-sized ships, the farther one with its hull opened for repairs. She gave them the usual safety margin, landing well away from the blackened circles around them.

She called on the ID channel. A voice—a new one, this time—acknowledged and said, "The Acting Port Commander will be out to see you in a few minutes." Raelle agreed and signed off.

"There's no biological hazard here," said Jay, "and we have no cargo to invoice. Shall we get outside the stretch out legs?"

Raelle shrugged. "Might as well. Want to crack the door and check temperature?"

"Sure." When Jay did so, there was

a slight but noticeable outrush of air. He checked the pressure indicator. "Lighter atmosphere than Earth's—just like the book says—but not enough to matter." Leaning outside, he sniffed it. "Plenty of Oh-two; at any rate. And warm outside." He climbed down to the ground—Raelle followed. They walked around *Search* and looked toward the nearest major building.

"Gravity's a little light, too, I think," said Raelle. She looked up, one hand shielding her eyes from Waterfall's sun. "Can we see the Companion from here? Coming down to land, I lost track of its orientation."

Also squinting aloft, Jay shook his head. "We should be able to spot it, I'd think. Must be turned away from it now."

He gazed toward a grove of trees edging the port, perhaps two hundred meters distant. Slim trunks—bare of branches, either by nature or pruning, for twice a man's height—topped with a rounded flattish mass of thick foliage. He wondered if they bore flower or fruit, and in what season.

Raelle nudged him. "Company's coming." From behind the building they faced came a small-wheeled open vehicle. The slow-moving cart approached and stopped, and the driver alighted—a woman, very tall, very thin, wearing a snug green coverall. Short black hair made a smooth cap above her high forehead. Eyes and complexion bespoke the Orient of Earth—high cheekbones and a long, narrow jaw dominated her strong features.

She stepped toward them and shook hands with both. "I'm Setra Tuang—currently in charge of North Port here." Jay must have shown his surprise, for she grinned. "Why do I do my own driving—no escort, all

that? It's simple—ordinarily I don't. But half our people are down at South Port on some emergency repair work, and the fact is I couldn't afford to pull someone off the job, just for show."

He liked this woman, Jay decided. Now she looked past him and Raelle—standing hipshot, one thumb hooked into her belt, other thumb and forefinger rubbing her chin, an eyebrow cocked higher than its mate. "Now what's that, you've brought us here? It doesn't look big enough to go much of anywhere, but you first called from quite a distance out—and it's certain your toysized ship wasn't built on this world."

Frowning, Raelle turned to Jay. He said, "Ms. Tuang—first, maybe we'd better ask a question or two. Are you familiar with Krieger-powered ships?"

She nodded. "Why, yes. *Star Chaser* there—the nearest hull—it's the second Krieger vessel we've had." She gestured. "Fantastic! Skip Factor well over a thousand—close to twice that, if pushed. And we'd been used to sixty or eighty, of course. Why, now—"

Jay shook his head. "Wait a minute, please. The Krieger ships that came here—in each case, was it their *first* trip from Earth?" And as she looked at him, eyes suddenly wide, he knew the answer.

SETRA TUANG's quarters complex adjoined her office—as she led them inside, Jay saw that for all her height and thinness she moved with grace. Looking around then, as they walked, he had the impression of more rooms beyond—but they turned aside into a study decorated, with moderate luxury, in a Chinese motif. Subtly different, though, from the usual style of that mode of decor—and when Raelle commented on the difference,



Tuang laughed.

"I'm Mongolian, really—with an assist from some displaced Tibetans a century or more back. Our preferences, traditions—not quite the same as the old central Chinese provinces, you see." She saw them seated, and prepared and poured tea. "Now then—I can see that you have something to tell me and that you don't like doing it. But please do—if something's wrong, it's my business to know it."

So they explained—all of it—the discovery of Drift and of its cause, the timelines they themselves had experienced, and their own place in humanity's struggle to cope with these phenomena. When they had finished, the woman shook her head. "How could we have known? How could *anyone* have known? Well—you've done *me* a favor, at least—me and mine."

"We have?" Raelle's mouth essayed a smile, abandoned it.

Tuang nodded. "One of my husbands must go to Earth, to do a sales job on a crucial project that's short of funds. He was going on *Star Chaser*—we were thrilled that his absence would be so short. But now—"

Jay leaned forward. "He still can. It'll take a little longer than you were told—but not much. One fact the Courier Service is trying to pass to every colony, every ship—that below a Skip Factor of one thousand, Drift never occurs."

Tuang frowned. "You're sure?" He explained that higher Skip was safe on short runs but that ten-third as a limit gave added assurance. Visibly the woman relaxed. "Good! Then Farig can ride swiftly, after all." She rubbed an ear. "*Star Chaser*, though . . ."

Jay spread his hands. "It's probably

Drifted from its own Earth, yes—but it will go to yours. And the return ship—it'll be safely briefed, of course."

Tuang stood. Staring past them—apparently at nothing—slowly she rubbed her hands down her sides, past her hips to full arm'slength at her thighs, then back again. She shook her head. "Tea is well and good—but for this saving information I think we deserve something stronger."

The planet's prize domestic liquor reminded Jay of whiskey but had its own distinctive flavor. He liked it.

FARIG MEILLIEUR entered while Tuang was pouring seconds. The big man—not as tall as his wife but largeboned and heavily muscled—acknowledged introductions and made a drink for himself. He sat, smiling; large white teeth contrasted with his dark complexion. Except for a jog at the bridge of the nose his features were regular; curly black hair, worn a little long, bore grey flecks. "Well—visitors! Always welcome—and what's the news from Earth?"

Setra Tuang told him. Meillieur's face tightened. "Hard to believe, this." He waved a hand. "No, no—it's not your word I doubt—merely I find it hard to see the universe playing us such tricks." He shrugged. "But you say—keep *Star Chaser* to no more than Skip one thousand, and I can with certainty return here?"

Raelle nodded. "That's supposed to give ample safety factor."

"Then I'll trust it." He turned to Setra. "Word from Felipe—he and Jiddu won't be rejoining our household soon. They estimate another week at South Port—maybe more."

She spread one hand and closed it. "That's what I get for marrying key

personnel. Well—you and Tom and I will have to keep the place going, by ourselves.” She looked to Jay and Raelle. “Excuse us for intruding private matters. Now then—” And she asked them about news from Earth, their own travels and future plans. “—and how long will you be here, do you suppose?”

Raelle began the explanation, omitting personal complications. “And whichever Earth we reach, we’ll probably stay there—or at least not risk Courier-level Drift again.” And—at least a week, they would stay at Waterfall. Even with lower Skip on the latest hop, they did not care to risk memory damage.

Tuang and Mellieur grasped the new concepts readily, surprising Jay. The woman said, “At the university a few kilos south of here, we have some good theorists. Would you be willing to brief them—give them a chance to work with these ideas?”

“And you should go on the Tri-v net,” said Vellieur. “—or at least provide a summary for one of the regular commentators. The public here—it should be informed. I’ll prep my chief on the matter first, of course—but I’m sure he’ll authorize the disclosures.” He stood, and left the room.

Tuang looked after him. “Actually, Farig has enough status to act on his own. He’s merely being tactful, as always.” She smiled. “Are you getting hungry? I am.”

FIRST, though, she showed Jay and Raelle further into the Tuang quarters—they were, she stated, listed in her name—to a suite she offered for their use. They accepted, and Jay decided his earlier guess at the size of the complex was correct. “We can bring your duffel in later,”

Setra said, and Jay seconded Raelle’s nod.

At lunch in a dining nook just off Tuang’s office, they met the other husband currently in residence—Tom Dardeen, redhaired, average in height and build, with bushy brows and a great beak of nose. He spoke seldom, and then in a soft voice. When he was briefed on the problems of Drift he said only, “It’ll be a time, won’t it—before all ships are alerted and can be sure of where they’re going?”

“Sure?” Jay’s chuckle held no amusement. “At least they’re a lot surer than we can ever be.” A thought came to him—he looked to Tuang. “It hadn’t occurred to me to ask, before—but in this timeline, do you know if Nobody Home is colonized?”

The tall woman shook her head. “I remember seeing it listed on the schedule, but I don’t recall the timing. Since there’d be no direct contact anyway, it’s not a matter we’d think to ask about. We can see if *Star Chaser* has any information—or perhaps the reports the other Krieger ship left.”

Raelle grinned. “But neither ship, most likely, is from *this* line. And when we return to Earth, *we* won’t be on it.” She turned to Jay. “So what’s the point?”

“An indicator, that’s all—as to whether we’ve gone further from our ‘Earth-two’ line, or maybe Drifted back closer to it.”

Tom Dardeen nodded. “It’s a strange way to have to think. I’d hate to need to learn how.”

Thinking of their instructor Ginith Claare, back on ‘Earth-one’, Jay forced a grin. “Raelle and I—well, we can’t say we weren’t warned.”

IN THE AFTERNOON, with Farig Mel-lieur's help, Jay and Raelle moved their gear in from *Search*. Also they brought in the remaining unrefrigerated produce. Tuang was interested both in sampling the fruits and vegetables from Nobody Home and in the possibility of growing some of them on Waterfall.

Once again, ship time and planet time were out of joint. Jay found himself yawning and suspected Raelle was refraining by sheer power of will; they excused themselves. The bedroom was large, its dark paneled walls hung with tapestries showing unfamiliar animals. Real ones, he wondered? He'd ask later; now it was time to catch up with sleep.

WHEN HE WOKE, Raelle was bathing. He joined her; then they made love in a leisurely fashion he had almost forgotten—in space, under high Skip, sex tended to become a hurried thing. Afterward they lay quietly, communicating more by smiles and touch than speech.

They got up to find they had missed the regular dinner time and settled for a snack, refusing to put anyone to the trouble of making an extra meal. For the rest of the evening they studied summarized reports on the planet—Setra Tuang, before retiring, showed them the applicable computer access codes. They went to bed rather late but woke early in Waterfall's morning, now attuned to planetary time.

THEY ARRIVED at breakfast as Farig and Tom were leaving. Setra, sipping Waterfall's version of coffee, stayed and talked. In answer to Jay's query she confirmed that the tapestried animals did exist. "I drew them from life, up in the fringes of the Central

Mountains." She grinned. "That was a miserable day—I kept sneezing into my oxygen supplier." At their puzzled looks, she said, "The gravity here, the sheer height of those mountains, composition of the atmosphere—I'm no chemist so I can't tell you exactly why, but here a sea level dweller needs oxygen at a much lower altitude than on Earth. If you want to do some climbing—hiking—we'll fit you out with breathing rigs."

After the sedentary days aboard *Search*, Jay was in no mood for heavy climbing—moderate hikes struck him as more to the point—but Raelle nodded as though she liked the idea. Oh, well...

He asked about topping off their fuel supply. Tuang assured him it would be done immediately. He thanked her and fell silent—finding no way to introduce the question he really wanted to ask.

When next she spoke, it seemed she might have read his mind. "I suppose our family situation—Farig, Tom, Felipe, Jiddu and I—appears a little unusual to you." Before Jay could enter a disclaimer she continued. "It was a matter of serious imbalance—a shortage of females that still exists to some extent. Actually the five of us are only part of a larger household, now split by the needs of circumstance. My sister Sualna and—no, the other names would mean nothing to you—they're stationed at South Port the past two years and more." She sighed. "It was happier when we were all together. Some day, perhaps—"

Raelle cleared her throat. "Are there children?"

Tuang smiled. "Oh, yes! My four and Sualna's three—but they're always together, either here or there. Another eight tendays or so—our year

begins when Companion reaches full opposition—and Sualna will ship them back to us again.” She chuckled. “There’s one good thing about it—when you live with children only half the time, you really enjoy them while they’re on hand!”

Suddenly she looked apologetic. “Why I tell you all this—I don’t know your ways, you see—there are so many ways now, on Earth, and even when I left there as a young girl.” Tuang shrugged, thin shoulders moving with grace. “But you should know—the reason we don’t invite you to share bed with us, it’s not personal rejection, but because we adhere to strict polygamy among ourselves. Only when a new person is under consideration—and it’s been years since Jiddu became one of us. Otherwise we’re a closed group.”

Jay hastened to explain that as Monogamists he and Raelle were even more exclusive. Nodding, Setra changed the subject. Jay was left to wonder, how did they decide on new admissions? Unanimous vote? He shook his head and listened while Setra Tuang, her fingers ruffling the short hair above one ear, made suggestion for the next few days’ activity.

When she was done he looked to Raelle and saw agreement. He said, “Sure—we’d like to see the mountains up close. And then, tomorrow’s as good a time as any, to talk with the University people.”

They saw *Search* fueled and its water supply replenished. Setra offered a supply of Waterfall’s own native foods—to take along, when the time came, in the improvised space locker. Then she turned the agenda over to Tom Dardeen, for a flight to see the lower reaches of the Central Mountains.

The aircar combined features of jet-copter and fixed-airfoil craft. Seeing Jay’s inspecting look, Dardeen smiled. “You won’t have seen this before, Pearsall. Local design, for our uncommon atmospheric conditions.”

Raelle’s brows tilted. “What’s the emphasis?”

Jay thought the question vague, but Dardeen answered, “Redundancy—for safety. So it’s a fuel hog, of course—but we can afford that.”

They boarded and strapped in, abreast across the foremost of three rows of seats. Dardeen moved the car along the ground, tilted its nose up and lifted it at a steep slant. Jay looked ahead, then back—below, the buildings dwindled to specks before forward motion left them behind. He said, “This one rises well.”

“Yes. Now we’re above good breathing.” Jay felt no lack of oxygen—then, hearing the whir of a small motor he realized the cabin was pressurized. Tom Dardeen said, “Anything ever pops, oxygen’s ready in your righthand armrest. Just pull up—it unfolds, all standard.”

He said no more, but pointed ahead. Even still distant, the mountains towered high above the car’s altitude. Below, the vegetation they passed changed slowly from bright green to a bluer tinge. Jay recalled the view from space—the ground beneath must be rising faster than it appeared to do. He looked straight ahead then—and seeing one of the mammoth falls of water carving down a vast chasm, drew involuntary breath.

“They named this place rightly—that’s certain.”

Smiling, Dardeen nodded. “We did, that.”

At half the height—a little more—

of the initial range, the aircraft labored and would go no higher. There were other vehicles—short range pagebuggies, almost; not dependent on air for fuel or lift—those could penetrate the Central Mountains. “We’ve explored, a little,” Dardeen said. “It’s all much the same up here. Nothing useful to us at this time—almost, a whole continent we can’t live on without carrying oxygen. Later, maybe—valleys full of hardwoods, and the minerals and ill—but not now.”

The car’s utmost lift brought them level with a plateau, a huge meadow with only scattered growth of trees. “We’ll land a bit, if you like,” Raelle nodded; he coasted into the gently sloping incline, midway between two flanking ridges. They slid to a halt amid grasslike growth that rose almost high enough to block their surrounding view; Dardeen backed the car and turned it. “Up here, I like a downhill start.”

Then in the stilled vehicle they sat without speaking. Jay turned to ask a question—Dardeen pointed to their right, and Jay saw animals emerge from high undergrowth to cross a shallow clearing.

From the tapestries he recognized their outlines. “Why—I thought she’d stylized them. But that’s how they really are.” Short-muzzled rounded heads sat neckless against the heavy shoulders. The reddish brown pelts, streaked with white, at first camouflaged the rest of body shape. Then he realized the strangeness—the lanky trunk was no thicker than the upper segment of any of the four limbs, though the lower portions tapered abruptly to skin over bone and tendons.

Jay shook his head. “There’s not room enough for the *organs* to

supply that much muscle.”

Dardeen chuckled. “That’s what we thought, too—until we dissected one.”

“Oh?”

“Those heavy limb segments aren’t all muscle. You realize, the organs don’t rightly correspond as we’d expect—but roughly the torso pumps blood and digests food. Breathing apparatus in the upper forelimbs—kidneys and the like in the matching rear portions.” The redhaired man grinned. “Not the most survivalprone design, maybe—as our biologists found when they tried to knock over a few for study without killing them.” He shrugged. “But these creatures—mostly grazers but not above snaffling smaller animals or grubs or bugs—they’ve got no real enemies at the active, adult level. So they do well enough.”

Jay knew what he meant—predators that attacked only the young, sick or elderly had little adverse effect on a life form.

ON THE WAY BACK to the lowlands they landed once more—to see inconclusive evidence that intelligence might once have begun to develop on the planet. As Dardeen watched, smiling, Jay and Raelle looked through an area that could have been ruins or fortuitous natural formations. Occasionally they picked up rock shards—weathered artifacts, or frost-riven accidents? After a time they rejoined their pilot.

Raelle frowned. “What’s the general scientific opinion?”

“Divided, of course. But the theory Setra and I agree with—two or three million years ago, during a wet era that allowed very few remains to be fossilized, we think a life form came close to intelligence.” He shrugged.

"But not quite close enough to cope with a drastic climate change."

Jay frowned. "But it was an Ice Age that pushed man over the top."

"Granted. But man was already warmblooded. These creatures, so far as anyone can tell, weren't."

To that, Jay had no answer.

SWOOPING DOWN the mountains, watching foothills and plain unfold and expand before him, Jay felt exhilaration. He reached to clasp Raelle's hand—her own grasp responded. Tom Dardeen said, "I always like it—the run back down to home."

"I can see why," said Raelle.

IN Setra Tuang's office that evening the next day's appointments were arranged. A quick flight next morning, south to the university—key personnel from *Star Chaser* would go with them. And the crucial interviews, to inform Waterfall of Drift, would be recorded for later broadcast. "That way," said Tuang, "you won't have to sit through all the longwinded commentary—they can splice that in afterward."

"Good enough," said Jay. "We'll be ready in the morning."

CHAV BAEDIG, captain of *Star Chaser*, carried his short stature with an air of confidence; the dark compact man smiled as he agreed with Tuang's arrangements. "I understand you have some rather startling information." As Jay started to answer, Baedig waved a hand. "There's no hurry, no need to go through it twice. I've heard the rumors—I can wait for the facts."

Shaida Laroux, his engineering officer, frowned. On her round, chocolate-hued face the expression looked childlike. Her fingers worried her closely cropped Afro haircut as

she said, "Those rumors worry me—I'd as soon know the worst now."

The two followed Jay and Raelle into the aircar. Last came Setra Tuang, who seated herself at the controls with the captain beside her. In the row behind, Jay sat between Raelle and Shaida, and once aloft he began a brief, simplified explanation of Drift.

Baedig listened also, for at the end he turned and said, "Not as bad as I'd been guessing—I'm relieved."

Laroux touched his shoulder. "No for you, maybe—you're not *quite* a loner, Chav, but nearly everyone you care much about is on *Star Chaser*." She paused. "And I guess that's almost true of me, too—not quite, but almost. The trouble is, though—how about the crew? A lot of them—they'll panic when they hear. It could be one hell of a trip, Chav."

His hand patted hers. "That's why we're not going to tell them, until we land on Earth." He faced toward Setra Tuang. "Can you keep a lid on this—not publicize it—for a few more days until we leave?"

After a moment the woman nodded. "It's your ship."

BAEDIG and Laroux could shed no light on *Search's* Drift position—on their own Earth both Nobody Home and its "rival", Sluicebox, had been colonized. Jay shrugged. "Well, that doesn't tell us much about this timeline, let alone the one we'll reach on Earth—but thanks for the information."

THE TOWN was larger than the one by the port. At one edge sat the university—its uniform architecture, spires and ornament copying a style once popular on Earth, set it off distinctly from the rest of the settle-



ment. Landing in an open area, Setra taxied slowly along graveled ways—giving the few pedestrians ample leeway—until she found the building she sought. In a marked area, less than a hundred meters away, she stopped. “This should be close enough. Let’s go in.”

Inside, high corridors were tiled in pastel shades. At one intersection Tuang asked directions, then led the group to a medium sized conference room. A heavy, greybearded man set his pipe on the table and rose to greet them.

“I’m Doctor Cleydron.” Introductions, handshakes, then, “I’ve called Doctor Rendova—she should be here soon.” At his gestures they found chairs and sat. “My branches of physics probably come closest to bearing on your question, but for some of the more exotic maths I rely on Isabel.”

Conversation had hardly begun when Cleydron said, “Here she is now,” and another round of introductions occurred. A small, quick woman, Isabel Rendova moved like a young girl—and looked like one as well, until a closer look showed weathering and tiny wrinkles in the fair skin, and grey in the blonde hair coiled at her crown.

She sat beside Cleydron. “Well, Henrik—I don’t suppose you ordered along any refreshment?” By his look, he had not. She smiled. “Don’t worry—I took care of it. Now then—” to the others, “tell us about this thing—all you know and can suggest about the discovery that reality is multiple.”

AT THE END of it, after many questions, she made half a smile. “Not much to go on, is there? Nothing quantitative at all—except for the

empirical data used to set up your safety factors. Henrik—do you see any way to extrapolate some kind of dimensional analysis?”

Cleydron sucked on his unlit pipe. “It’s all speculation, of course—doesn’t mean a thing as yet—but yes, I can set up a model to think with. I’ll try first one additional time dimension, then two—and see which gives the best picture for possible distribution of timelines.” He turned to Jay. “They didn’t tell you *anything* about the theoretical approaches taken on Earth?” Jay shook his head. “Then I’ll probably duplicate most of their mistakes, too.”

Rendova said, “There has to be a force—though dimensionally speaking that’s not the proper term, of course—that tends to hold an object on its own timeline. The few cases we’ve been given—Skip Factors and travel times for ships that did and did not Drift—we can use those to assign some arbitrary constants.” She grinned. “Then at least it will *look* as if we know what we’re talking about.”

The session broke for lunch. Doctor Cleydron suggested the building’s own cafeteria but Setra Tuang, smiling, shook her head. “I did my graduate work here—remember? Students can eat anything, I suppose. But we—well, frankly, while we’re here I’d hate to miss a chance to eat at the River Shore—and my expense account can handle the lot of us nicely.”

As the group walked outside and to the aircar, Jay noticed that the two doctors’ expressions seemed more pleased than protesting.

THE RIVER SHORE restaurant occupied a low, rambling structure with massive, exposed wooden beams and hardly any walls that were not

mostly windows. An entire side of the building extended out over the water then ran, uncovered, beside their table. Outside air did not enter—the outer wall dipped slightly below the water's surface. The group was offered the opportunity to fish in the slow current—"Catch your own lunch!"—but only Captain Baedig accepted an angling rod.

"I just want to try it," he said—and ordered from the menu with the rest. When just before the food was brought, he landed a writhing, goggle-eyed creature that snapped huge teeth together and waved handlike flippers, he freed it from the hook and dropped it back to swim away.

The meal—an assortment of aquatic creatures prepared in various ways—was very much to Jay's taste; as he pointed out, it beat institutional cooking several ways from Sunday! Over coffee Raelle brought out her Earth-status sheets from the two timelines she and Jay knew, plus comparable data provided by *Star Flame* on Nobody Home. Questioning Baedig and Laroux on key points regarding their own Earth-of-origin, and Tuang and the two doctors concerning theirs, she filled out two more outlines.

"They're all fairly close," she said when she was done. "But the two Earths Jay and I have known, and the three listed here that we haven't known, do form two definite groups, I think."

Rendova nodded. "That fits what you told us—the higher the Skip, the greater the Drift. Too bad there's no way to quantize the data."

Henrik Cleydron cleared his throat. "Maybe there is. Oh, nothing exact—it's all grossly approximate. But I think I can work up a fairly

respectable-looking curve on it, something you can use for rough prediction."

"Prediction?" Raelle leaned forward. "You mean—given the trip parameters, we could know what kind of Earth to expect?"

"Oh, no." The doctor smiled and shook his head. "Nothing so concrete. Simply, judging from changes you and others have found, how much Skip you'll feel is wise to use on your way to Earth."

To Jay, the words sounded rather final. Not, he thought, that they had any great choice in the matter. . . .

ON THE WAY BACK to the university Isabel Rendova said, "I think we have all the information you can give us, for now. If you come up with anything else, or if we have more questions, we can call each other. I know you're busy, Setra—so if you all want to make the Tri-v tape now and return to the port . . ."

After a moment's pause, Tuang said, "Yes. That's probably best." So when they returned to the university building Rendova led them to a recording studio and Cleydron found an assistant to operate the equipment.

They took seats along a table, facing the Tri-v camera—Jay and Raelle at the left, the two doctors in the middle, and Baedig and Laroux on the other end. Isabel Rendova introduced herself and the others, then asked questions from a scribbled list, drawing answers from Jay and Raelle in a logical, informative order. Jay felt strange repeating things his questioner already knew, and had to remind himself that they were performing for a larger audience. When it came to their individual experiences, he and Raelle told them impersonally, as though they had

happened to others or as hypothetical possibilities. Then Baedig and Laroux discussed their own expectations. And it seemed a very long time before Rendova smiled and said, "That is all the facts—and speculations—we have for you at this time. I wish to thank our guests for their time and consideration." She waved a hand—the assistant turned off the equipment and she said, now in a conversational tone, "If we repeated ourselves a little, they'll edit it for us. Frankly I think we all did very nicely!"

The two doctors came outside and accompanied the group to the aircar before saying goodbyes. "When we have anything for you," Cleudson said, "if we do—we'll call. In any case—" this to Jay and Raelle, "do check with us, won't you, before you leave?"

They agreed, and Setra Tuang took the car aloft.

DEPARTING from their previous direct route she followed the shoreline, staying low enough for good observation. The terrain varied—first, near the river, a stretch of level beach, then a rocky section that rose to form a craggy headland before dropping again, then gravel and hummocky sand dunes topped with sparse growth.

They saw very little animal life—only a few grey, smooth creatures floating half awash, heads on short necks dipping occasionally to the surface as though feeding. "You wouldn't believe how fast they can go," said Tuang, "with the little killer-fish after them." Then she corrected herself. "Not fish, really—they defy classification by Earthly standards. Anyway, this isn't the season for them, here."

Near the port another beach

started, but there they turned inland. In a few more minutes they had landed.

FREE FOR THE AFTERNOON, Jay and Raelle ran the routine checks aboard *Search*, found all equipment performance well within limits, and adjourned to their quarters for a time of privacy. At dinner that evening the table seated seven—Chav Baedig and Shaïda Laroux were the additions.

The captain seemed preoccupied, but not until after eating did he open his subject. Then he said, "I wish I'd taken notes today—about your Earth status sheets and the Skips and trip times of ships that did and didn't Drift. I need to ask your opinion—about *Star Chaser* and what our chances are."

Sidelong, Tuang looked at him. "I thought the chances didn't worry you, Captain Baedig." Then she reached to put a hand on his wrist. "I'm sorry—I don't mean to tease. It's only—"

He grinned at her. "Sure—I know how it sounded. But it's not for me—it's the crew. Somehow they've heard. Nobody's fault, you understand—there wasn't any clamp on discussing the whole thing, and so far as you people knew, no reason for one. But I can't—as I'd planned—keep them all ignorant and happy until we reach Earth. I have to tell them something. And it seems best to tell the most accurate truth I can manage."

Raelle said, "Your own trip parameters again then, Captain Baedig?"

When he gave them, she nodded. "We don't have to count the time you spent below Skip ten-third. Basically you drove two and a half months at close to fifteen hundred, plus brief buildup and decay periods which hardly matter." She consulted the

data Admiral Forgues had given them, back on their Earth-two, and paused.

Waiting, Baedig said, "Is it that bad?"

"Oh, no—I'm only trying to think how to say it, to give your crew a realistic picture but not a needless fright." After a moment, she nodded. "You can tell them that in large—major items—their new Earth won't differ much. But individually, things that depend on chance or minor decisions—these may or may not be changed. And tell them they're not alone—that others have faced the cost of Drift and managed to adjust."

"Most of them," said Jay. He thought of what Woody—the Woody who was *not* his father—had told him, and continued. "This next—it's up to you, whether you want to tell your crew or not. But one thing that can happen—*has* happened—is two of the same ship landing on the same Earth." Seeing Baedig's startlement he added, "Yes—you could find yourself and your crew, or most of them, already there. Or arriving after you. And come to that, there's no rule that says there couldn't be *more* than two duplicates."

Baedig turned to Shaida Laroux. "What do you think—should we tell them *that*?"

The round, brown face looked solemn. "I don't think so, Chav. Give them the general statement, only—keep the specifics to ourselves." She smiled at Jay. "But it's good to know the chances—we can be braced to help, if they do happen."

The captain touched her hand. "Doesn't it bother you at all? I confess—it's the one thought that's jarred me personally. I mean, with two of me there—which one had the job and the assets, and which is out in

the cold?"

"In the case I know of," said Jay, "the Space Service took care of its own, duplicates and all. Personal problems—well, it provided counseling, as best it could. But—there were some tragedies, I'm told."

Raelle spoke. "I met myself—in fact, it was for that chance that I went Courier. And it was wonderful. Captain—if it happens to you, *welcome* the opportunity."

Brows slanted, he looked at her. "There's one difference. I suspect that you're a nicer person than I am."

Laroux laughed. "You're not so bad, Chav."

NEXT MORNING aboard *Search* they found an intermittent malfunction in the telemetry backup equipment. The problem was more in Jay's specialty than Raelle's so she left him to locate it. He had never found intermittents easy to pin down and this one was no exception—more than an hour passed before he found and replaced the faulty component. And still, on the test set the balky unit operated correctly eight or nine times out of ten! He came outside, saw an aircar landing nearby and walked toward it. The vehicle taxied in his direction—he was surprised to see Raelle at the controls, Tom Dardeen sitting alongside.

They stopped, and climbed down to greet him. Grinning, Raelle said, "Jay!—Tom's shown me how this thing handles; he says I'm checked out to fly it. So if we like, we can go exploring for a day or two. Do you want to?"

After a moment, Jay agreed. First they had lunch, then packed provisions and other supplies aboard the car. Jay was pleased to find that the last two rows of seats converted

for sleeping and contained the necessary coverings. He said nothing when Dardeen brought portable oxygen supplies and instructed them in the use of the devices. But once Raelle had lifted the vehicle and pointed it toward the mountains, he said, "If it's up to me we won't be using those. We're out for a little exercise—exploration. There's no point in going where we're dependent on these gadgets."

She smiled at him. "I agree—but Tom thought he was doing us a favor, giving us a chance for a new experience. So—"

"Right—that's why I didn't say anything at the time. I can't see taking risks with unfamiliar gear just for fun, though. So let's leave the cabin unpressurized, and stay within our own limits."

Raelle nodded, and began to explain the aircar's controls—they were more numerous and complicated than Jay had expected. "Yes, but it's a hybrid vehicle," Raelle said. "Dardeen told us that—remember? And everything's handled separately. This now . . .

Jay watched and listened—in case of need he wanted to know how to handle the car. Once he said, "The design could be improved. There's too much duplication—one lever could control those two functions, with circuitry to phase between them as the speed changes."

She adjusted the two controls he had cited. "Yes—much the way our various sensors on *Search* multiple in to the same set of indicators. When we come back, shall we suggest this?"

He shrugged. "We might hint a little—and if they're interested we can develop the ideas. But we don't want to sound patronizing. These people have done a lot with what's

available."

THEY WERE BARELY into the rising slope of bluish vegetation when thinning air hastened their breathing. To stay as low as possible, Raelle turned to follow a broad, windind canyon. Soon they neared the end of its relatively level part—ahead it rose abruptly. "Hyperventilate a little," she said. "I want to pop up a way, for a quick look."

He grinned and obeyed—after all, oxygen was available in the armrests. She swooped up level with the canyon's banks, and higher. To the right lay a gentle upward slope. On the other side, past the ridge, Jay glimpsed a long valley—Raelle turned and dipped into it. Down into more breathable air again, she said, "Does this look like a good spot for a quick vacation?"

"Sure. How about that clearing beside the little lake, at the upper end?"

"Looks fine." She turned in that direction, brought the car to its best approximation of a shallow glide, and landed.

AFTER that first afternoon they stayed one full day, another, and then one more—hiking, exploring, sunning in the lee of the ridge that stood against prevailing winds. The small lake was too cold for prolonged swimming—but not for brief plunges, with the sun's warmth for drying afterward. The freedom from schedules, pressures and people encouraged lovemaking.

Once, afterward at twilight, they lay together and watched a silent, stately parade of small furred creatures whose ears and tails were bobbing, extravagant plumes. And late each night they saw Companion

rise—its cold glare almost half as bright as day.

The lake's water and several kinds of native berries—a manual in the aircar pictured a number of edible species—stretched their provisions to make the third day possible with comfort. On their fourth morning Jay said, "I suppose we have to get back now." They arrived in time for lunch.

SETRA TUANG and Farig Mellieur—Dardeen was not present—greeted them pleasantly and asked what they had done and seen. At one point Farig nodded. "You were lucky, to see the little paraders—they're a rare species. I've seen them only twice, myself—and I used to spend considerable time in the near uplands." He sighed. "Taking creatures, they are."

A little later, Setra commented. "It's as well you didn't camp in low-oxygen country. I know Tom was dead set you'd want to, and usually it's safe enough—but you both being new to it, I confess I've been a little worried while you were gone." She smiled. "You had no difficulty with the aircar, I expect?"

"None." Raelle shook her head. "Tom's a good teacher—I'll want to thank him."

After a moment's silence Mellieur said, "He's at South Port—should be back tomorrow or the next day. You won't be leaving before then?"

Raelle looked to Jay. He shrugged, and she said, "There's no real hurry. We'd thought, perhaps tomorrow—but another few days wouldn't matter."

"That's right," said Jay. Then, "Is anything wrong?"

Setra spread her palms, raised her brows. "That's the trouble. We're not sure yet—or whether there's any help

for it." To further questions she shook her head. "Until we know more, there's no point in guessing."

FEELING SOMEWHAT EXCLUDED, Jay left the table as soon as politeness allowed, claiming *Search's* maintenance checks as excuse. Raelle stayed, saying, "Then as soon as I've finished my coffee, I'll take first turn at a good hot soakout."

On *Search*, Jay gave close attention to the telemetry equipment that had recently given trouble, on the chance that some part of the supporting circuitry might have caused the module to fail. Eventually he satisfied himself, and in the maintenance log crossed off his question mark.

Coming outside he saw Shaida Laroux descending *Star Chaser's* ramp. He waved to her; she waved back. Reaching the ground, she stood waiting—he walked to meet her. "How are things coming? Is *Chaser* close to departure?"

She nodded. "Another week, perhaps—everything's moving on sked. I wish I could say the same for *Thor's Thunder*." She inclined her head toward the further ship's opened hull. "Maybe you'd like to look at it—do you have time? You might have some ideas that could help."

"Sure. What's the situation?"

As they walked together she told him. After a look at *Chaser's* specs, *Thunder's* engineering officer thought he might be able to modify his own drive for greater Skip Factor. "No question of full Krieger speeds, of course—he's shooting for perhaps three hundred." But we've run into difficulties."

"Not enough power, or circuits too light to handle it? Has to be one or the other."

Laroux shook her head. "We ha-



ven't investigated the two aspects separately. Neither of us are any kind of designers—we've just tried to beef up toward Krieger specs. But so far, something's not right."

Remembering back to Nobody Home and his own crude design work on *Star Flame*, Jay nodded. "No promises, but I can give it a look—and a few computer simulations to check possibilities."

"You do know design, then?"

"A little—enough to spot the bottlenecks, and maybe see which ones can be cleared. Given the necessities, of course."

Boarding *Thunder* they passed crew members who greeted Shaida and looked at Jay with brief interest. In the drive room the man who came to greet them was Jay's height, even though stooped—and thin, a dried and weathered figure. Shaida introduced him—"Skaen den Telmuk." The man's handshake was dry also, the skin almost rasping. Below sunken cheeks his thinlipped smile was that of a skull—but the grey eyes were gentle. After Shaida explained, he said, "You know the ins and outs of what makes Skip units tick?"

"A little," Jay admitted. "Could we sit down over a readout of your original specs, and the changes you're making?"

"Sure—I was ready for a break, anyway. Let's go have some coffee with our talk." He gathered up a pile of crumpled drawings and led the way.

BESIDES COFFEE, Jay sipped with appreciation from a tiny glass of den Telmuk's brandy. While he looked back and forth from one section of the specs and modifications to another, no one spoke. For nearly half an hour he studied, making notes for questions he would need to ask. Then, before

speaking, he considered what he had learned.

Available power was a fixed quantity, but the two engineers—copying from *Star Chaser's* design—had modified auxiliary apparatus to improve utilization: nearly thirty percent. They had corrected the most obvious power bottlenecks—but had overlooked two important ones. He estimated a possible forty percent further improvement, no more. And that was by no means enough. Now then . . .

He saw it—the combination of multiple and cascade, *distributing* power automatically to various thruster and Skip stages. *Thunder's* circuits were relatively inefficient—and the newer design used the same components. More of them, though, and arranged differently . . .

He pointed. "This section—the interface modules—you have spares?" Before den Telmuk could answer, Jay added, "What indicated Skip Factor have you reached, so far?"

"About a hundred and thirty—where at this stage we'd hoped for two hundred." Then, "Spares? How many? We've got some."

And Shaida Laroux, "*Chaser* can afford a few—Chav's agreed to that; remember?"

Den Telmuk leaned forward. "What kind of Skip can we get?"

Jay shook his head. "No guarantees. But it *looks*—well, Shaida said you were after three hundred. I think we can come awfully close."

BACK IN the drive room Jay studied the Skip unit—he dismantled a connector and inspected its leads. "We have to rewire the framework anyway—I think we'd better use heavier stuff." Den Telmuk demurred—there wouldn't be room

enough. Jay grinned. "Either cut and splice sections to expand the frame, or run all your low emission leads outside the shielding." When Jay went to *Search*, and Shaida with him, den Telmuk was busy with a welder and some scraps of bar and angle stock.

As Jay had hoped, all his computations for *Star Flame* were still available in the computer. He sent Shaida to requisition wire of the proper sizes—from *Chaser* or from the port's supplies—and took a revised readout, correcting the interface changes in his rough line sketch. Aloud he said, "I wouldn't have thought I knew enough—but it *should* work!"

HE TOOK the information to *Thor's Thunder* and discussed it briefly with den Telmuk before returning to the Tuang quarters. In their suite he found Raelle relaxing on a sofa, listening to a tape of chanted poems. Sometimes in unison and sometimes in counterpoint a man and woman spoke—though they were not singing, their voices made shifting harmonies.

Raelle smiled at him—he waved, moved to bend and kiss her, and retired for his own turn in a hot tub. Then he rejoined her.

They were sipping wine—economically, from the same glass—when Setra Tuang's voice came from the intercom. "Dinner in about half an hour. Unless you'd rather eat alone—in that case just order when you're ready."

Jay reached for the comm terminal. "We'll be with you in a few minutes. Thanks." So they dressed and met the other two in the larger dining area.

This room had a large skylight over the main table—now, reddened by high cloud masses, sunset glowered. As it dimmed, slowly, the room lights

brightened. Automatically? Jay supposed so. The group sat and began eating.

Their hosts said little and seemed tense—talk concerned food, the expected weather, Jay's report on *Thor's Thunder*. To the latter, Setra Tuang showed interest. "Can you leave copies of all modification data, to help other older ships that may come here?"

"Sure, if it works." At her look, he added, "It should, you understand—but I haven't seen it *tried*, before."

Farig Mellieur spoke. "On Earth, don't they upgrade ships?"

"Of course. But that's a production job, handled by specialists. Except for retraining, to handle Krieger-range instruments, ships' personnel have no part in it."

"Naturally," The man nodded. "I should have thought."

Again conversation ceased. Troubled, Jay hardly noticed what he ate. At the end, with a minimum of asking and response, coffee and liqueurs were poured. Jay saw Raelle look to him, brows drawn down in puzzlement or anxiety. He had no answer—raising his liqueur glass slightly in her direction, he sipped from it.

A young man entered—a boy, really—stopping midway between door and table. "There's a call from South Port—it's Mr. Dardeen."

Tuang stood. "I'll take it." She left quickly; the boy followed.

Mellieur held up crossed fingers. "Good news, I hope."

"So do I." Together Jay and Raelle said it, then looked at each other—out of the tension brief laughter broke. As if we knew what it's all about! The man seemed to find no fault with their reaction—he smiled and refilled their cups.

A few minutes later, Setra Tuang returned. She moved stiffly, all grace gone. Now her features made a blank mask—at the corner of each eye, a tear glistened but did not fall.

Mellieur rose and went to her. She gripped him tightly—her knuckles showed white. "Farig!" When she let go he helped her, as though she were aged, into her chair.

The two tears ran down her face. Another pair formed—but she blinked them away and shook her head, short hair barely rippling with the movement. "It's the slow death, Farig—Tom says there's no question. And it's not bad enough that we're already low on antigen! The damned thing's mutated again—what the child has, the stuff from Earth can barely stem, let alone cure!"

Mellieur gasped. "Poor Areyn!"

**B**ETWEEN THEM, Farig and Setra explained. The disease, which afflicted only young children born on the planet, had the symptoms of a metabolic disorder—in some respects food ceased to nourish and the child dwindled, its rounded limbs shriveling to bony shanks and its torso shrinking to a skeletal appearance. Yet there was a seeming factor of contagion—perhaps some native virus, as yet unidentified, that acted to predispose or precipitate the malady.

At first the blight had struck seldom, a rarity that caused isolated grief but no widespread concern. Then, only a few years ago, the wasting sickness had swept an entire community. Two pitiful corpses, frozen, had been taken to Earth for study; the first Krieger ship to reach Waterfall had brought supplies of a curative agent. "Antigen, we call it," said Farig Mellieur. "That's not the

full proper term, just what we use for short. Catch a child early and does it for thirty days—complete cure. Start treatment later on, it may need the stuff for nearly a year."

"And the ravages *before* treatment," said Setra Tuang, "aren't reversible." On her fingers, she counted. "Muscle degeneration, coordination loss, partial paralysis, whatever degree of sight and hearing has been lost. Intelligence . . ." Face in her hands, she rocked back and forth; only small noises escaped her.

"They warned us," said Farig, "that the thing might mutate—that the antigen could be less effective or even useless against changed forms. We couldn't tell for sure—some cases seemed more resistant so we kept the children on treatment longer, to be on the safe side. That's why we're running low, now." On the table his hands clenched. "We're expecting—we were promised—supplies of an improved agent, effective against a wider variety of strains. But that ship's not due here for at least six months. And Areyn . . ."

Jay found words. "Who—who is Areyn?"

Setra raised her head—now the tears streamed. "My sister's youngest—three years old. Sualna's daughter by Tom Dardeen."

**RAPIDLY**, Jay asked questions. Ræelle looked at him, frowning—then her forehead smoothed and she nodded. The facts . . .

The slow death—roughly half a year from onset to ending. But the first month was crucial—if treatment began much later the result was at best a crippled child, and at worst a human vegetable. Areyn? Perhaps a week into it, maybe less—but the antigen was only marginally effective

if at all. Areyn was only one of several in need of treatment from the scanty stock, though the others, at least, were responding to the curative agent.

Convinced, Jay nodded. But another question—"What happens if you slow the life process? Drastically."

Farig looked puzzled; Setra wiped her eyes and answered. "It helps—but not enough. The death slows only about half as much as the child's own metabolism. But—?"

Palm toward her, Jay signed for silence while he calculated. Then he nodded. "Hypothermy's out—we have neither the space nor facilities. With available drugs, what kind of ration can you get?"

Setra Tuang's eyes widened. "Five or six, sometimes, with extreme dosage—four, easily. But—you say, *you* don't have facilities. What—? I mean, your little ship can carry only two. And—"

"Two adults, with a safety factor," Raelle said. She reached and squeezed Jay's hand. "And we're not the largest people in Courier work, by any means. If we don't have leeway for a three-year-old child—" And now Setra's smile reflected Raelle's.

"A minute, here," said Mellieur. "What need to drug Areyn?"

Jay shook his head. "A few days from *some* Earth. We told you—high Skip increases Drift, makes it more likely we'll find bigger differences. So we can't go at top Skip. What's the point of taking Areyn to an Earth that's never heard of the problem?"

AT FIRST Setra nodded—then she sat bolt upright. "An Earth? I'd forgotten—if Areyn goes with you, we'll never see her again!"

Mellieur grasped her hand. "Do you want the child *here*, Setra—or alive?"

Aimlessly her head moved from side to side. "Farig—I don't know what to say. What can we do? I—"

Jay spoke. "Wait a minute—there's another chance." Quickly he detailed it—*Star Chaser* was nearly ready to leave. Departure might be accelerated; he, Jay, would stay and help complete the work on *Thor's Thunder*. Skipping at ten-third, *Chaser* was nearly ten weeks from Earth—but over this distance no ship had ever drifted at Skip twelve hundred, and at that rate the time was roughly eight weeks. By slowing the child's metabolism—"well, it's a gamble. By your own figures, she'd be near the edge of the permanent-damage threshold. But you could be sure of Areyn's reaching the same Earth, the same people, that studied this problem, *here*."

Tuang looked to Mellieur. "Farig?"

He shook his head. "We can't decide. Put the matter to Sualna and Tom—she's their child. But have them bring her here immediately."

And, Jay realized, there was more to it. "If she goes with us, now—we *could* hit an Earth that doesn't know the situation at all. What data—medical studies and chemical formulations—do you have? Besides the antigen itself, we'll need copies of all that."

Tuang nodded. "Yes—of course." Lack of knowledge, she explained, was not the difficulty. Simply, the planet's medical people and their technicians were only partway along the path of making the tools to make the tools that could handle the necessary analyses and syntheses. "We knew it would take time—another year, maybe two—we counted on new

supplies from Earth to tide us over. But for Areyn, the time's run out." She stood. "I'll go call Tom and Sualna. Probably they can't get all the data together this evening, but they should be here sometime tomorrow." She left, and her walk showed some return of grace and vigor.

Mellieur said, "Excuse me. I'll go see how fast *Star Chaser* could lift, given overtime help around the clock."

When he was gone, Jay said, "One thing about these people—they don't just sit on their hands. Any chance at all, for an answer, and they're up and moving."

"Yes. Jay—which gives the child her best hope? Us, or *Star Chaser*?"

He shook his head. "Drift only knows, Raelle. I sure don't."

NEXT DAY Dardeen flew in before noon. Jay, as he was entering *Search*, saw and heard the landing—but completed his chores before returning to the building. He arrived to find a conference in session—Dardeen, face grave, stood to greet him. The woman alongside, who also rose, was neither so tall nor so thin as Setra Tuang. Her features showed resemblance but were less strongly accented, and her hair was worn loose, falling not far short of her waist.

"Sualna Tuang, Jay Pearsall," said Dardeen; his pride was evident. Jay took the woman's hand briefly and then they sat.

"They've been telling me the alternatives," she said. Her voice was much like her sister's, but with a light husky pitch. "Let me see if I understand them." And briefly she cited the arguments for and against ending her child on *Search* or on *Star Chaser*. "Do I have it correctly?"

Jay nodded. "What you've said,

yes. What you left out—I'm not sure I made that clear last night, to the others." The perfect arches of her brows slowly lifted. He said, "You understand that on *Star Chaser* Areyn would reach the Earth that developed the antigen. There, the gamble is the time element." She gestured agreement and he decided that Drift had been explained to her, well enough. "With *Search*, time's no factor—we'll have it to spare. But—not only can your daughter never return to this timeline of Waterfall, but we definitely risk reaching an Earth that never heard of your problem and will have to tackle it from scratch, using the data you give us to take along. Did you know that part of it?"

As she shook her head the long, glossy hair rippled. "I—I'll have to consider." She turned to the others. "What do you think, all of you?"

None, Jay saw—not even Dardeen, the father—wished to make the decision for her. Suddenly he saw the strength of the bond that joined this group family, long divided physically but not in thought or feeling. When Setra had spoken, and Dardeen and Mellieur, the choice was still Sualna's. She turned to Jay.

"If Areyn goes on the large ship she will assuredly come back here alive—but perhaps not all of her self?" Jay had to nod. And if she goes with you, I'll never see her again. But—if I understand properly—either she'll be fully restored or—otherwise she will die. Is that right?"

Until he had swallowed something intangible, Jay could not speak. Then, "I'd say those are the most likely outcomes."

Her eyes closed—for a moment she could have been a statue. When she looked at him, Jay knew what she would say. "Areyn takes after

me—and I was always of the gambling instinct. She goes with you.”

THE CHILD was in another room, warmly bedded, drugged and fed through a vein in her tiny arm. When Jay saw her, her eyes were open. There was a kind of consciousness at such times, Sualna told him, but so slowed that no communication was possible. Dardeen had shown him a Tri-v sound picture of Areyn, taken before her illness—a happy child, filled with joy and vigor. Here, now, lay only the matrix of that child—eyes dull, cheeks sunken, mouth lax—most of the hair gone, since loss of hair was usually the first visible symptom. “If it weren’t for that,” Dardeen had said, “we might be another week or two, catching on to what’s wrong.” Looking at the pathetic little mannequin Jay could find no word of comfort—for any of them.

HE DID NOT WANT to eat with the group. Pleading necessity he went to *Star Chaser* and found Shaïda Laroux sipping a last cup of luncheon coffee. “Can I grab a snack here; and a little later go do all I’m going to have time to do, on *Thunder*?” While he ate he told her—not in detail—why *Search* had to leave immediately. “But I’ll get everything down on paper for you and den Telmuk. This afternoon. All right?”

“If it has to be, I guess we’ll manage.”

**E**VEN A SMALL, comatose child requires a certain amount of space. Arranging this in *Search* was not easy. All right—Jay and Raelle could eat sitting in the control chairs or on the sleeping couches. The dining nook came out and the reinforced crib, with its supportive equipment and

necessary supplies, went in. Fastened solidly, of course—and Jay insisted on full shielding all around, with insulated safety controls. “We plan to stay at our below Skip ten-fourth. But just in case—something could change, could happen—she has to be protected against high ionization.”

Areyn’s parents, her aunt Setra and Farig Mellieur all agreed. Tom Dardeen affected an air of cheer. “See how well she’ll be cared for?” But his tone did not convince Jay—nor, to his eyes, did it reassure the others. Nonetheless, he felt, they all pretended well—each trying to keep the rest from sinking into pessimism and desolation. But Jay had attended funerals that were happier.

HE EXCUSED HIMSELF for a last visit to *Thor’s Thunder*, taking with him the notes and readouts he had promised Shaïda. Aboard, the work was going well. Initial tests of the partial reconstruct validated the hopes he had given, and although the complete unit could not yet be tested under power he considered that the remaining changes were straightforward enough. Jay’s confidence rose again. He shook hands with Skaen den Telmuk. The woman left the ship with him, and it was at the foot of *Star Chaser’s* ramp that he bade goodbye to Shaïda Laroux.

AT DINNER no one mentioned the child. The concerned family spoke of impersonal matters—overall progress of the colony, and the reports that *Search* would take to Earth. “Relevant or not,” said Setra, “when you get there.”

“That’s right,” said Jay. “The premise of Courier Service is that events in large tend to follow a pat-



rn. Discrepancies make themselves obvious, so the reports are always of some value."

For coffee they moved to Setra's study. The conversation, it seemed, as not portable—Jay felt the strain of people avoiding a subject. Finally Sualna said, "I—I'm losing the will to follow my decision. I seem to have to talk about it—do you mind?"

Raelle, sitting beside her, took her hand. "Of course not, Sualna. What most disturbs you?"

Facing the child's mother, Jay saw as she stared past him. "I can give to Areyn—for her life's sake I can do that. But—to *whom*?"

Raelle's head turned sharply; she gazed into the other woman's face. Why—we hadn't thought! Just the medical aid—that's as far as I'd considered the matter. Jay—?"

He did not hesitate. "We'll keep responsibility for her, not pass it off to any impersonal agency—you can trust me. I don't know—I'm not sure—whether our circumstances would be suitable for foster-parenthood." He stammered briefly. "Of our qualifications, either. But Areyn won't wind up in a Care Center."

"I grew up in one, you see," said Raelle. "They're well managed, really—but they lack the close personal ties a child needs." Her smile was lopsided. "No—if we can't give her a home ourselves, and I rather share Jay's misgivings on that score, we'll make very sure she had a good one before we bid leave of her."

Jay said, "Do any of you have relatives on Earth whose alternates might be well suited to raise Areyn?"

Dardeen, Mellieur and the two sisters looked at each other. Dardeen started to speak, then shook his head. No. He and my niece—they're good kids, but they don't stay put in one

place long enough for a child to get to know the neighbors."

Setra spoke. "Our aunt—if she were only younger . . ." And Sualna, shaking her head, almost smiled.

"Oh!" Raelle's exclamation startled Jay, and the others turned to look at her. "I—why are we looking for fosterparents? Sualna—in whatever timeline we reach, *you* will be here, won't you? Or perhaps on Earth? So—"

Sualna gasped, then turned abruptly to hug Raelle. Her shoulders heaved—but when she sat up again, wiping tears away and brushing hair back from her face, her quivering smile was broad. "Of course!" Her eyes closed. "Why—possibly *that* me will have a healthy Areyn and welcome her twin. Or it might be that she has lost hers, and to have her restored will be a miracle!" Now she looked around, from one to another. "Maybe—but only in my dreams will I dare hope it—from another timeline *my* child will be returned!"

The odds, Jay thought, were bad. But he did not say so.

THE NEXT MORNING, with Dardeen's help, Jay and Raelle moved their belongings back aboard *Search*. Waiting, then, Jay was beginning his pre-lift-off checks when Shaida Laroux entered. "There's a problem," she said. "Could you give us a few minutes, over on *Thunder*?"

Raelle said, "Go ahead, Jay. I've nearly finished my part of the checklist—I'll have plenty of time for the rest of yours." He nodded, and followed Laroux off *Search*.

"Warm this morning, isn't it?" he said. Ground fog had not wholly lifted—the sun showed only as a spot of brightness in the haze, but he felt its heat.

The woman smiled. "Yes, and getting warmer. Not a bad climate here, though—nothing extreme." For a few steps she was silent, then said, "The trouble on *Thunder*—I don't think it's the equipment."

"Then what is it?"

"Either Skaen's misread your data, it looks like, or he's not trusting it. I think he's made changes on his own."

"What kind?"

She shook her head. "You look at it first. Maybe I'm wrong."

He shrugged. In silence they reached and boarded the ship. When they entered the drive room, den Telmuk had the skip exciter humming on test—making adjustments, checking his meters and readjusting. Jay cleared his throat. "How's it coming along?"

The dried, stooped man looked up, then step by step cut power to the equipment. He shook his head. "Not too well—there'll be no three hundred out of this setup."

"Mind if I take a look?" Applying test power, Jay made a few routine checks. Den Telmuk was right—indicated performance was far below Jay's predictions. He disengaged enough connectors to be able to open the main unit and began checking major circuit layout inside the containing framework.

Yes—that was right, and that, and—*wait a minute! What the hell?* He had spoken aloud; den Telmuk said, "What do you mean?"

Jay faced the man. "Why didn't you follow the plans? it's a *balanced* design, damn it! You've hooked up a brute force feed—wasting half your power, fighting mismatches you've put in."

The older man hunched his head down toward the protection of his stooped shoulders. "It didn't look

heavy enough—I was afraid of burnout. I—"

"It's the *phasing*, I told you. I split the primary feed, keep it lanced. You—" Short of yelling stopped himself. "Den Telmuk—you want this thing to work, or do you?"

"Well, of *course*—"

"Then—" Jay shook his head. "I'm leaving today—I have to. I'll take time to change the strapping you done, to what it should be." I picked up den Telmuk's tools a began shifting the connections. "For the sake of your ship, man, follow the design exactly as I've given it to you—all the way. Then test it—you're not satisfied, do whatever you damned well please." He shook his head from his shoulders and began the next tier of strapping, terminating. "I'd hate to think I've been wasting my time here. But if you don't give me the design a chance, before messing with it, I sure as hell have."

Blinking, hands spread, den Telmuk searched for words. "No wait—didn't mean—" He shook his head. "You're right. I didn't understand the way you drew it, and I got scared. All right—I'll do it that way now and hope it works."

"It should. To the best of my knowledge, it will." Finishing the wiring changes he set the tools aside. "And if it doesn't satisfy you entirely, on your static test runs, simply go back to your original layout. You *know* it will work. Right?"

Den Telmuk stood silent, then nodded. "Sure—I should have thought of that myself. It's just—it's *new*, and—"

"Trust your test procedures." Jay shook the man's hand. "I have to leave now. Good luck."

Out the corridor and to the ram

haida Laroux followed. At the exit portal she grasped his arm to halt him. "Thanks, Pearsall. I think Skaen will be all right now. It was just—you were leaving, and he didn't know—"

"Used to having things handed to him all certified true and approved—that it? And this time it wasn't, and he knew it."

Laroux grinned. "Something like that. Well—it's been good knowing you. Go safely to Earth." He offered his hand but she moved past it to hug him. After a few moments they released each other. She stepped back; he nodded, turned and walked down the ramp to ground. On his way back to *Search* he thought, *sometimes you have to take new things on trust. He couldn't—can I?*

SUALNA alone brought the child aboard. The woman's eyes were wide, her face solemn. Until she had Areyn placed in the crib and all the supportive equipment connected she spoke no unnecessary word. Then, straightening up, she said, "Setra, Arig and Tom—if they can't get here, they send their goodbyes and best wishes. Another rush order from South Port—equipment failure and houth of spares." She paused. "Barely, they had time for Areyn's last farewell. I—" She stopped, as if she had forgotten what she intended to say.

She looked from Jay to Raelle and handed Raelle an envelope. "Setra said to tell you, your friends at the university are away for a few days—you won't be able to talk with them before you leave. But here's the leadout, their preliminary report analyzing Drift. You'll want to study it." Her voice trailed off.

Raelle looked to her. "Sualna—is there anything we can do now?"

As though she had not heard, the woman said, "I've cut off the rest of Areyn's hair, you'll notice, so it won't make an untidy mess, falling out." She looked down at the child and stroked its pale cheek and forehead. "Now, if we could wait a little? I've stopped the drug—for a few hours, only—I'll set it back properly before I go." She looked up. "It's so she can be aware enough to hear me one last time. You see?"

"Of course." Raelle spoke; Jay could not. "Come sit down, won't you? We can have coffee or something."

"Tea?" Jay nodded. His hand at Raelle's shoulder signaled her to stay with Sualna. Though he would have preferred coffee he made tea for all three of them.

Then, sitting on the edge of the sleeping couch, he said, "If there's anything more you can tell us—what to watch for, what to do if there are any changes—?"

Sualna gestured toward the crib, with its panel of meters and control knobs. "Everything's there. Except for keeping her clean, just check the meters. If one starts drifting out of the indicated range, adjust the associated control. If that doesn't work, there's—there's nothing you can do. Nothing anyone could do." Her hand shook—Raelle steadied her cup and then took it as Sualna let go and covered her face with both hands. Her body shook once and then again, and was still. She lifted her head, looked to Raelle and retrieved the cup. "Thank you—I'll be all right now."

Like a statue she sat. Now and then she looked toward the crib, but said nothing. Jay's muscles began to ache—he felt inhibited from moving to relax them. His tea was cold; at

measured intervals he sipped it anyway. Just as he decided to go make a fresh supply—anything to break out of this strange paralysis—Sualna stood, and moved to bend over the crib.

Raelle went to her. "Is anything wrong?"

"No." The taller woman shook her head. "She's coming awake—as much awake as I dare allow, even briefly." She put a hand to the small chin, and said, "I'll have to speak very slowly, and repeat a great deal. Please be patient with me."

Jay gestured to her. "Whatever you need—take your time."

Without answering, Sualna knelt, leaning over the crib, and began to speak. Her voice came low; its huskiness greater than usual—slowly she spoke, and as she had said, with much repetition. "Areyn. Areyn. Areyn . . ." Momentarily her brows raised, as if noting a response that Jay—from where he sat—could not see. "Areyn, I love you—always remember I love you—love you, Areyn, love you, I love you . . ."

On and on, ever repeating but constantly adding some new thing to what she had said before. " . . . so you can live, Areyn. You must go away so you can live, for I love you. Always remember, I only send you so you can live. Remember, Aryn . . ."

It was, Jay thought, like the phasing of the power feed he had adapted for *Thor's Thunder*—a blending of multiple and cascade. " . . . back to me, Areyn. Someday you may come back to me, because I love you. Remember—you go away so you can live, Areyn. Remember I love you, you may come back to me, I love you. . . ."

The pattern of phrases grew; it went full circle. All the thoughts and

wishes, all the love in Sualna's voice became to Jay's ear's a unity. Without volition he found himself standing edging forward to see into the crib. And as Sualna's grave face relaxed into a tender smile he saw the child's mouth, lax until now, draw itself into firmness. The eyes half-opened, moved from side to side and fixed upon Sualna. One small hand twitched, the mother grasped it. Still she continued her litany—and now Jay saw, distinctly, that the little girl smiled. Then the lips moved—Jay heard nothing but Sualna nodded. "Yes, dearest—yes! I love you, too. So you will go and live, and remember, and—and someday come back and—yes, Areyn, oh yes!"

Her voice grew softer. She put one finger to the child's mouth; and Jay did not understand how or why she moved it. For minutes more she repeated her phrases as in a ritual chant. Then, looking at a meter she said, "You can't hear me now—but still love you." And nothing more.

After so long, silence came as a shock. Sualna stood. In matter of fact tones she said, "One thing I forgot to tell you. Every day, perhaps in the morning, test her front teeth with your finger. If you find them beginning to loosen, note the date—it's critical. You can't do anything about it but the doctors on Earth will need to know." She looked around her, then directly at Jay and Raelle. "Thank you for your patience, and your help. I know you'll do your best. Goodbye."

She turned to go but first Raelle and then Jay moved to embrace her. Tightly held together by all their arms, the three stood. Then slowly they relaxed their grips and were apart again. Sualna nodded. "Yes—is the same for me." Then she walked, without haste, out and down

rom *Search*.

And Jay said, "If we fail her, she'll never know. But that won't make it any easier to live with."

SHORTLY BEFORE NOON, *Search*—lifted on a Krieger trajectory—not the standard one from the Can's own files but a higher-arching course obtained from *Star Chaser*. "That particle storm passing the Cluster," Chav Baedig had said. "It's still growing—here's *mass* building in there—but we don't know how fast. So they tipped us a little, to be sure we'd miss it cleanly." After Raelle made the second course correction, the last needed for another forty hours, she and Jay checked the crib indicators and found Areyn Tuang's condition stable.

Then, safely committed to space, they had lunch.

AS ON their previous hop they leveled off at ten percent of Limit, with Skip Factor averaging ten-fourth. The fuel now entering the hellbox was still from the mined tailings on Nobody Home. Its composition varied—both Skip and percent of Limit were subject to unpredictable change. When the situation grew worse rather than improving, Jay and Arelle set up watch-and-watch procedures—at all times one sat as pilot, ready to compensate for the erratic power flow. Jay set the computer to integrate their varying progress, to give them position checks and the necessary timing for course changes. After a few watches the forced routine began to seem natural.

THE SECOND "morning", after checking Areyn's crib and finding the meters steady and the small teeth still firm, Jay sat to relieve Raelle at

control. "I'll be glad when this freaked-up batch of fuel is used up."

She nodded. "Yes." Before she could say more, a deep rumbling behind them shocked both into silence. *The hellbox?* Jay made to rise, to go see what was happening—but *Search* bucked and shuddered, throwing him back hard enough to daze him.

Shaking his head he blinked, and looked—*the meters!* Thrustor drive was crowding half of Limit, and Skip Factor climbed—suddenly the needle jammed offscale! Raelle said, "What—?"

As Jay reached for the steering level, blue ionization thundered, blurring sight. He pulled the lever—his other hand scrabbled for the power switch he could no longer see. Before he found it the Courier Can—all of it—shook and rang to titanic impact. The blue glow flared and collapsed, leaving his skin smarting raw—his lungs gasped for air that seared them. For a moment—how long?—vision darkened further and he could not move or think.

Gradually, sight returned—and a measure of coherent thought. Through the feel of overall aching bruise, he concentrated on understanding what he saw.

Arms around her head, Raelle lay slumped forward—he shook his head and looked to screens and meters. All right—*Search* was pointed safely toward Galactic zenith. But—he ignored the insanely flickering digital readout and compensated for the backup meter's bent needle—at only half the speed of light. Skip Factor read *one*—the unit had blown.

**R**AELE's breathing was shallow but even; conscience drove him first to see to the child. Areyn had curled—

convulsed?—to the fetal position, but the indicators showed normal. Rearranging her, into a more relaxed stance, could wait.

Back to Raelle. Gently he pulled her up, leaned her against the control seta and drew her arms from their tight grip around her head. Her jaw muscles were knotted. Cords stood out in her neck, and veins at her temples—her eyes held shut, clamped, the corners twitching. Gently he stroked—slowly, patiently, massaging the tensions out. At her forehead some hair fell away—where it had been rooted he saw pinpoint burns. Under his hands he felt her head move slowly, then faster, from side to side. After a moment he held it still—her body jerked in a great spasm and her eyes opened.

"Jay? I—"

"It's over, Raelle—we're safe now." *If we can repair this.* "You, though—are you all right?"

She winced, then tried to smile. "I don't know. Probably. When I stop hurting." Then, "Areyn?"

"All right for now—needs some attention but it's not urgent. *You, though—*"

Raelle shook her head. "Let's worry about *me* later, too. What *happened?*"

"I don't know exactly. Some extreme irregularity in the fuel, I suppose—so hot it paralyzed the metering circuit. But how—?" He shrugged. "All I saw was Skip Factor going offscale—then the thruster drive hit half of Limit and the exciter blew." *I hope that's all we've lost.* He told her their course and speed—she looked at him blankly.

He squeezed her shoulder, not hard. "Before I activate the spare exciter I'm going to pump some fuel through the works, with power off. Not much—only enough to be rid of

this freak stuff, and there shouldn't be much more of it. But we can't chance another thing like this, happening."

As though she had not heard him, she said, "Skip Factor offscale? Why—that would be ten-seventh." She looked at him. "You know what that means? At half of Limit—Jay, for a finite period of time we were moving at five million times the speed of light!"

He tried to soothe her. "Don't worry. I checked—we haven't got ourselves lost, or anything. We're not all that far off course."

"Not in space, maybe. But, Jay—how about *Drift?*"

FIRST they saw to the child—gently rocking her contorted limbs and body into a relaxed position, caressing the small face until its tensions eased. "Slowed as she is," said Raelle, "imagine the jolt it took, to do *that* to her." Jay nodded. He hoped Areyn had taken no permanent damage—the odds against her were bad enough already.

Raelle insisted on evaluating and ministering to her own hurts. "You go see what's left of the drive, and tell me later. I'm going to unfold the bath cubicle and have a lot of steam and deep heat—then I'll report to *you*. All right?"

He had to agree. While she stripped for her chosen therapy he gathered his test instruments and began inspecting the drive for damage.

She was still in the cubicle, wisps of steam escaping, when he finished. Their troubles were not so bad as she had feared. As nearly as he could tell, his guess was correct—the catastrophe was due to passage of a concentration of high-energy fuel that was also intensely radioactive. It had ionized



and incapacitated the metering sensors, overriding the control settings; suddenly both thrusters and Skip unit had overloaded past all safety limits. But aside from the Skip exciter—for which they had a replacement—nothing was damaged beyond repair.

He pumped fuel out, fruitlessly but harmlessly, until the Venturi chamber monitor showed radioactivity down to safe limits. The bin indicator informed him that fuel reserves were still well above the danger point.

After stowing the test gear, he set to preparing a belated lunch.

RAELLE emerged from the cubicle and folded it away. She wore a towel over her hair and another around her hips. Jay saw a colorful bruise on her left shoulder and one more just under her breast. Otherwise she seemed undamaged and, he saw, moved well.

She looked at him a moment, then said, "I'm not hurt, really. My scalp feels like the middle of a tug-of-war—I had no idea electrostatic repulsion could be *that* strong! At the front I suppose my hair lashed out and got grounded. I've cut bangs to cover the burned spot—if it doesn't grow back I'll keep them." She moved to sit down. "Now can we have something to eat?"

Her air of belligerence startled him. Then she laughed, and he did also. "Sure," he said. "Coming up."

TOGETHER they installed the spare exciter, retuned the overall Skip unit and then mutually adjusted exciter and normal drive for most efficient power exchange at the interface. Jay fought a stubborn reflective peak to no avail, until he found and corrected a loose connection. Sighing, he straightened up. "It's fine on test—let's locate ourselves and put the fi-

gures into Tinhead. Maybe we'll reach Earth yet!"

Raelle was at the screen controls. "Our trajectory's nearly twice as high as we'd planned—but our vector isn't too far off. Extra time, I'd guess, less than ten percent."

Tinhead, the computer, agreed. In a few more minutes their course was reset, and *Search*—back to a conservative and now steady Skip Factor of ten-fourth—pursued its path toward Earth.

But Jay knew Raelle echoed his own thought—which Earth?

WELL ABOVE ECLIPTIC, with a minimum of ten days—by Sualna's guess—before Areyn's condition could become critical, they entered the Solar System. No outer planet held rendezvous with their course. Pluto wheeled almost in opposition—Neptune was angled to one side and Uranus near quadrature to the other. So it was not surprising that no signals from those beacons came through the hash of Solar static.

Jupiter, though—or rather, the drone-landed beacon on Big Jove's largest satellite—should have been heard. "It could be out of order," Raelle said. "The radiation belts—you know how often the units conk out, there."

"Maybe." Jay shrugged. "And it looks like the Guild won its strike, on this timeline—nobody's manning the old beacon ship in the Trojans, if it's still there at all."

From her seat beside him she reached to stroke his neck; he felt tensions ebbing. "What does it matter, Jay? It's Earth that's important—and we'll be there soon."

She was right, of course—*Search's* Skip Factor was edging rapidly down to normal time, while thruster drive

gently brought the Can from ten percent of Limit down to five, then three and still slowing. Below their course Mars drifted—but even at the nearest approach no signal answered *Search's* call.

Raelle scowled. Jay said, "We'll have to wait 'til we get there—all the way. That's all."

"Sure." But she spent more time at her remote instrument displays, tuning and adjusting. Screens and meters gave no response.

Now they approached Earth itself. Only a few million kilometers distant from the planet, the silence was not promising.

Jay clutched Raelle's wrist. "I think—let's circle in behind Luna. Just in case."

WELL OUTSIDE detection range for a vessel of *Search's* mass they entered the ecliptic plane. Earth was to their right with Luna almost directly trailing in orbit—a little more than half full, seen from Earth, and waxing. Only when the satellite hid its primary, or nearly, did *Search* begin approach. And even from a distance they could see that the Farside installations they knew—well, those structures simply did not exist.

Raelle drew a shaky breath. "We've Drifted badly, Jay."

"Yes." Slowly now, even by the standard of training flights, Jay came near the moon and then around its right side. And there was Earth—left hemisphere sunlit, the other dark.

ON THE DARK SIDE, visible with the screen turned high, lights shone. Until he exhaled, Jay didn't realize he'd been holding his breath. *At least, there's people—civilization.* "That's Europe, I think, having the middle of its evening."

"Then our port will be at mid-afternoon. Shall we go in?"

"If it's there, yes." For though neither of them had commented, they had not seen or detected any other craft in space.

Raelle took *Search* downward. Jay began calling on standard ship-ground frequencies but the monitors showed no response. They dropped closer—five thousand kilometers, three, two—at one thousand she slowed to hovering and moved back and forth, parallel to the surface. "See anything, Jay?"

"No more than you do. The port area's somewhere in the middle of that cloud cover—without infra I couldn't even locate the coastline."

"All right. Down some more, then." At five hundred the monitors showed a pulsed signal at high power—it carried no intelligence, merely a uniform, repeated on-off pattern. Jay looked to Raelle and shrugged.

Just above one hundred kilometers the detectors showed sign. "Jay—a ship! And another—a whole squadron, it looks like! But—they're coming right at us. I—"

"Ships, hell—those are missiles! Get us out of here!"

WHILE HE STILL SPOKE, Raelle headed *Search* east at full power—normal drive only, for at those speeds Skip gave no advantage—then pulled up in a tight turn directly away from Earth, toward Luna. The missiles veered to follow—the leading one gained on them and came within fifty kilometers. Then the distance began to increase, and the missile exploded—a fireball, bloomed. *Search's* radiation counter chattered briefly; Jay looked and said, "Bad stuff. A little closer and we'd be need-

ing treatment we don't have aboard." Behind them, one by one the other missiles detonated—futilely, for distance gave safety; now at each sunburst the counter merely clicked a time or two. Then, its crew silent, *Search* drove outward.

Again they neared the moon. Raelle said, "What can we *do*? Even if food and fuel would last, there's no place to go. And Areyn! Jay—"

"I don't know, either. We've got to *talk* to Earth. Here—let me have control. You did a great job down there—but the lunar orbit I have in mind, it's easier to do it than tell it."

HE SET a polar orbit, temporarily parallel to Luna's direction of motion. Viewed from Earth it circled the moon counterclockwise, never out of sight behind the satellite. "This isn't really stable," he said. "Too many forces pulling on it. But with occasional corrections it should hold long enough."

"Longer than *we* can last, you mean?"

"I didn't say that." Raelle was out of her seat, getting some food from the space locker. Jay went to her—they clung together and kissed. "Unless Earth has gone completely crazy here," he said, "they'll *have* to welcome the technology we can give them." He shook his head. "What happened down there—it has to be some kind of mistake."

"All right—let's eat." She handed him a bag of space-frozen fruit. "Want to thaw and peel these while I do the other stuff? The Tuangs apparently like the rinds, but I can't stand them."

They ate leisurely, discussing what they would say to Earth—to anyone they might be able to reach. Then Jay checked Areyn again, to make sure

the violent maneuvering had not disarranged her, and found nothing changed. Raelle sat at control, searching frequency bands for anything directed at *Search*. He joined her, but put his own efforts to transmission—he recorded a tape, spliced it into a loop and began beaming it Earthward on several wavelengths, occasionally changing one and then another.

"Calling LeGrave spaceport—calling *any* spaceport. Calling Earth, anyone who hears me. This is the Courier Can *Search*, out of LeGrave—uh, about a year ago. If that doesn't make sense to you I'll explain in full when somebody answers me. We need to land—but we can't if you're going to keep shooting at us. Come in, please—*anybody*—come in, please!"

THE TAPE ran nearly four hours before it drew response. The intermittent beam they had detected earlier came again—but now the pulses varied in their timing, oscillating at frequencies in the audio range. Raelle looked at Jay. "Can we decode that?"

"I think so. Looks like pulse position modulation. Not very efficient for this kind of work, and we're not set up for it directly. But I think I can dupe up a compatible feed, from the scanner circuit. . . ."

The frequencies did not quite match—he had to maladjust his equipment to one extreme of its range before a distorted, gravelly voice came from the speaker. ". . . are you, anyway? You haven't come far, in anything that size. Where's the mother ship? Why's it hiding? No records on anything like that—let us have a look at you, if you're not some kind of alien monster." A pause, then

the voice began again—soon they realized it was also a loop tape. Jay stopped his own and spoke directly.

"All right, I'm reading you. The first thing—before I explain ourselves—why the hell did you try to blast us, down there?"

Almost as soon as the signals could make the roundtrip, the other tape stopped in midphrase. The voice said, "If you don't know that, you can't be Earth human."

THE MAN REFUSED to explain further. "Not until I see you first!" Jay controlled his impatience and gave the parameters by which a receiver on Earth could get a viewscreen picture from *Search*. More than an hour later the man acknowledged reception. "Two of you, huh? Is that all there are? Step up a little closer—we want a good look." A pause—then, "You're human, I guess. Now then—where can you have come from?"

"From Earth," said Raelle, "by way of Nobody Home where we expected a colony and didn't find one, and a stop at Waterfall on our way back."

"If you're going to lie, you'll have to do better than that. Colonies? I doubt if any survived. There's been no contact for more than fifty years—and there'd better not be, either. Try the *truth*, now—though how we can believe you, I don't know."

Puzzled, Jay finally decided what to say. "The most important part of the truth is hard to believe—if you don't know it already, and I gather that you don't. The funny part—the trouble—is that if you could be aboard here, face to face, you'd be convinced in five minutes. But just to tell it—well, I'll try."

He began with the prime fact—the reality of multiple timelines. Knowing

nothing of space progress on this Earth he detailed its history on Earths one and two—sublight travel, then Skip Drive, Krieger ships and finally the Courier Cans and the reasons for their use. "And that's how we're here. Things went differently with you, I take it?"

For a time he thought the other had cut the circuit, but on a scope he saw the pulses, moving only with the random push of noise level. Then the man spoke again. "For purpose of discussion I'll accept what you said. It makes no difference, because you can't land anyway. There's no way to authorize it even if I wanted to. And now I'll tell you—assuming you really don't know—why I couldn't possibly want to."

He told it well, Jay had to admit—briefly and to the point. This Earth knew nothing of timelines or Drift—its technology had not progressed that far. Through the eras of sublight travel and early Skip Drive its history was much the same as the ones Jay and Raelle knew. Exploration, the start of a few colonies, and then . . .

"The Plague, you see. That's what put us back in our bottle—and drove the cork in solid."

The clincher was that no one knew where the scourge had originated. Three ships had returned, each from separate missions covering a total of seven worlds, within hours of each other. The crews mingled and traded experiences among themselves as well as meeting with port personnel, newpeople and scientific inquirers. When the sickness appeared, no one realized it was serious until the deaths began—and by then it was spread among crews and groundies alike.

"In the next two years nearly half of Earth died—worse than that, some

places. Every time we thought inoculations had it under control, the thing mutated. All that saved us was that the *survivors* were immune to the mutations.

"After that, six more ships landed. Most of their crews died; too. Then we—those in charge at the time, I mean—set up the Embargo. No admittance—no more landings. We put fuel and food dumps up on the moon—if there was any left, you'd be welcome to it. But it's all gone now, I'm afraid—the last two ships that came, there was nothing for them. So it was stand clear or get blasted. And it still is."

RAELLE LEANED FORWARD. "You can't turn us away like this! We have a sick child aboard. She needs help—*now*."

Immediately Jay knew they had lost. After the three-second lag the voice said, "Sick? No, thanks—not another Plague. You—"

Overriding the voice, Jay ceased to listen. "*Not* Plague. It's a metabolic disorder—attacks only young children born on Waterfall. We have the data. Your facilities—"

He waited. Slowly the voice came. "I'm sorry. Even if you're right, we can't take the chance. And neither can you! One thing I hadn't mentioned. All of us—Plague survivors and their descendants—we're carriers. You couldn't come down here and stay alive."

Poor Areyn! *We tried, Sualna . . .*

"You may wonder why we can't send you up fuel and food." *Without suits or airlocks, what good would it do us?* "Something we hadn't realized earlier—you see, like everything else, it'd be contaminated." Now that was ridiculous—no organism could live for long in close proximity to fuel, and

irradiation could safely sterilize any food. This Earth's fear, Jay decided, had become pathological. "Anyway," the voice continued, "we disabled every space craft on Earth, all but the missiles to keep anything from landing."

They looked at each other. *There must be something we can say—but what?* Ten seconds passed, then the voice came. "No point in talking any more—it's all been said. It hurts to know you exist. I want to go and forget it."

"Wait a minute!" Raelle's voice went shrill. "We've got so much you can use—Krieger drive, our improved Skip units. Other things—your scientific community—"

When the man spoke his tone was totally impersonal. "You don't understand. Those things are no use to us—no use at all." Then on the 'scope the pulse pattern vanished; from the speaker came only background hiss.

**F**FUEL AND FOOD—given those they could survive, and perhaps even save the child. "Head out just long enough to build our speed and Skip Factor—*ensure* Drift—then come back. We have time enough to do that once—maybe even twice—before Areyn's condition becomes irreversible."

Jay made a new loop tape. He proposed that supplies be placed at an isolated location—a small island, perhaps. "We'd land there and nowhere else—land, load and lift, as quickly as possible. Then you could flame the site thoroughly. There's no risk, none at all." He finished by explaining how he planned to eliminate any possible contamination from Earth's gifts, and put the tape on beamed channels to Earth.

An hour passed with no response.

Finally Raelle said, "They're still too afraid—of *any* contact. But what if—?"

Her plan was better, Jay agreed. She taped it herself. First she explained how *Search's* space locker worked. "We'll open it in space, you see—it will be completely sterile. We land as proposed before, isolated—but we stay sealed. You have people in protective suits—the kind you use for working with radioactives—have them come and load food and fuel into our space locker. None of our air reaches you—none of yours reaches us. Back in space again, cold and vacuum kills any possible contamination that might have been introduced. It's *totally* safe—for you and us, both."

Again they began transmission. No answer came—none at all. After twelve fruitless hours, Jay made a fourth tape.

As he recorded it, Raelle shivered. "Please don't let it play on the monitor. Once is enough."

His brows raised. "You disagree?"

"No. It needs saying. But *I* don't want to hear it again."

So it was through a headset that Jay listened as his voice repeated his words—slow, cold and deadly.

"Cower then, Earth! Hide in your corked bottle—hide from the Plague you've already beaten. The lives you spent in that victory are wasted, because you behave as though you'd lost, instead.

"So hide! Live where you are, and die there. Leave the universe to somebody—some race—that isn't afraid of it!"

He heard himself twice through, then nodded and unplugged the headset. He turned to see Raelle watching him.

"Jay—do you think anyone is listening?"

"Probably not." He managed a grin. "But it makes me feel better."

FOR TWO DAYS, hardly speaking except in the course of routine work and the gaspings of frantic love, they performed their duties as though those chores still had meaning. The trouble was, Jay thought, that there was simply no future for them—and yet he could not think to end their lives before starvation did.

And could Raelle? She did not speak; he did not ask.

The third day, when they checked pale, somnolent Areyn, Raelle said, "Jay! Her teeth—they're loosening. Not much, but you can feel it." He leaned over and put his own finger between the pallid lips. Yes—to his gentle pressure he felt the teeth move slightly.

He nodded. "You're right. I'll log it—Sualna said to."

"For *what*?" She screamed it. "We're all dead, Jay—you know it and so do I. The only question is—do we end that poor child before her body eats itself?"

"No." Without thought the answer came. "I have to admit, though—I don't know why."

Once again in his own mind he recited the parameters of hopelessness. Fuel—enough to take them perhaps a tenth of the way to the nearest colony—assuming they reached a timeline in which colonies existed—and then coast forever at four-tenths the speed of light, as dead there as they would be here. Food—a week, perhaps two, then slow starvation. And the child—what to do? He shook his head. "It's—Raelle, Areyn dies only when we see the wasting's gone irreversible. Or to avoid leaving her alone without us."

"Yes. I suppose that's all we can do



for her, now."

On the fifth day Raelle would not speak at all, nor touch him or be touched. Ignoring the breakfast he had prepared she sat at the controls. He watched her run computer simulations—when he asked what she was doing she still kept silent. He looked at Areyn—was the child worse? He could not tell. He moved to sit beside Raelle, watching her and then toying with the screen controls to look at Earth—so near in time and distance, yet unattainable.

Rage, as it had done so many times before, came strong within him and then drained away. He could put *Search* to ground if he wanted to—not for the first time, he thought that. And perhaps he would, Plague or no Plague—if only to show that unknown voice what his silly missiles were worth if Jay Pearsall decided to challenge them. . . .

No. He shook his head. That was foolish. Leave *Search* here in orbit—a more stable one, rather—he'd have to remember to change it. Someday, perhaps, this Earth might regain its courage and look outward again. *Search*, left intact, could save the timeline many years of slow experiment. Yes—that was best.

He sunk into reverie, hardly noting what he saw. Childhood dreams came to mind, and his parents—then their childless counterparts on Earth-two. A flash thought of Reyex Turco and the abundant woman who waited for him. Nobody Home, the missing colony—sea devils—fighting them—the harsh life, the work of survival—Dolman Crait and his threats. Then Waterfall—Setra Tuang, Sualna, the others—and *Areyn*! Jarred into the present, Jay blinked and turned to see what Raelle's

movements meant, that his peripheral vision had caught.

"What—?" For she was activating the Skip exciter, feeding it power. "Raelle! That won't do us any good—we'll just die out *there* someplace, instead of here. And here, maybe *Search*, someday—"

She faced him. Under her eyes the skin was pouched and darkened. Now she shook her head. "Jay—you didn't read the reports from the university on Waterfall. Neither did I, until now. But I thought—I thought I should understand why we have to die. Instead, I found—"

"But what are you *doing*?"

"Probabilities—sheafs of probabilities—they may duplicate themselves, or almost. We've Drifted so far—Jumped, really, with that burst at Skip ten-seventh. The old advice, to stay with a bad bet—it doesn't apply now, because if we stay, we're dead. So—"

"But we don't have *fuel* to go out and back!"

Wide-eyed, lips stretched to a caricature of her smile, she shouted at him. "Jay! Who ever said we had to go anywhere, to get up to high Skip Factor and its Drift?"

FOR A MOMENT he could not speak. In his mind his training replayed itself—*when* you reach certain speeds you begin to boost your Skip accordingly. Of course. *When*.

Abruptly he broke into laughter and reached to hug her shoulders. "Why—you're *right*! Right to try it, anyway. Nobody ever—I mean, Drift was a by-product, something to avoid or put up with—no one ever considered the idea of building Skip Factor by itself, at rest. *How* did you think of it?"

Her smile had seen better days,

but she said, "Because there wasn't any other way."

AS SKIP FACTOR built—odd, how differently *Search* resonated to the exciter alone without the thrusters' growl—Jay made small maneuvers, shifting *Search's* orbit to Lunar elliptic for the greatest stability he could compute. As he finished that chore he saw Skip pass five thousand—when he ceased drawing power the rate of increase curved upward. And they seemed to *race*, not coast, around Luna.

"Ten-fifth," said Raelle, "and climbing: Do you see any changes?" For a moment he didn't realize what she meant—then he studied Earth on the screen, near to passing out of view in the new orbit.

"Nothing yet. Except heavier cloud cover. Do you suppose—"

"Could be greenhouse effect, Jay. The timeline that rejected us—it's Plague may have saved it from overpopulation that would have smothered in its own wastes."

"Possibly. I—" Now as Earth reappeared the screen showed change. "*Look!*" Gradually, orbit after orbit Jay saw Earth lose its vapor sheath, saw its oceans dwindle and vanish, then slowly reappear. For long moments he conceived these events as happening in time, in sequence—then he realized the changes were *across* timelines, in Drift. "Sheafs of probability, you said, Raelle! All those timelines where Earth's lifeless, uninhabitable—but it's looking better now. Maybe we should cut back on Skip and be ready to grab a viable line, if we can spot one."

Yes. It's hard to understand, to know what to do—no one's ever *done* this before." The sound she made was

between a laugh and a hiccough. "We don't even know—are we still Drifting *away*, or maybe swinging back toward where we started?"

He had no answer. "Just pull down some more—on our Skip, I mean." They went behind the moon again. And when they came around it—there, rising from Earth, *a ship*.

"Cut it, Raelle! Cut it dead!"

TWICE MORE they circled Luna. At each opportunity Jay put the screen to high mag and studied Earth. On the third pass he said, "Let's try it."

"Land, you mean?"

"Maybe. Leave orbit, anyway—start down slowly, see if anyone's willing to talk. And if not—now, thanks to you, we *still* have a choice."

THIS EARTH fired no missiles. In short order its communication system put a picture on *Search's* viewscreen. The woman facing them—Jay assumed their own picture was getting through—smiled and said, "You're the new shuttle, are you? From the Mars equatorial station?"

Raelle gestured for Jay to do the talking. He said, "This could take some explaining. My first question may give you an indication." He paused. "Do you have star travel?"

AFTER the first shock, information came quickly—from both sides. For more than a century this Earth had launched sublight ships, but Skip Drive had never been developed. Jay's brief explanation quickly brought higher authority on the circuit—his screen split into two pictures, then four, then six. The last to appear—a tall black man, nearly bald—said, "I don't have to understand all this in detail to know you're the most wel-

come visitors we could have. Whatever we can do for you, just name it."

Now Raelle spoke. "We have a child aboard—" and quickly she told of Areyn's plight. "We've brought a sample of the basic medicine, and all the data available. If you—"

The man shook his head. "We don't have even a start on that kind of problem." Then he must have seen, as Jay saw, how her mouth compressed. For he said, "But we have *time*, you see. You say you've slowed the little girl's life processes by a factor of four or five—something like that." He smiled. "We can slow them nearly to zero—virtually suspend them, indefinitely—without harm. So bring her—our people will begin work with what you've brought, and sooner or later the child will live."

THIS EARTH'S PORT had the same location they had known, but a different name. *Search* landed, and a group—including the woman who had first spoken with them—brought a ground car to greet them. The woman—short, chunky and somewhat exotic to Jay's eyes—introduced herself. "Telia Hargan—since you can't know our customs, I'm to be your mediator." Jay wondered whether the butterfly design on her left cheek was tattoo or more temporary adornment.

He said, "Will you grant us Courier privileges as we know them? Access to your computer data to see how your Earth compares with the ones we've known?"

"Give them *our* Earth-status-sheets, too, Jay. We'll have to share."

"Of course, Raelle—next time we go aboard. I didn't think to bring them."

Telia Hargan brushed black, bushy hair back from a sawtoothed hairline.

*That can't be natural—what's the purpose? And the method?* She said, "Plenty of time—we'll be a while, just adjusting to the concepts you bring us. Tell me—do your alternate timelines really trade back and forth between themselves? That's a fascinating possibility."

Jay realized his answer—that all interline contact was at random, that to his knowledge no one could control Drift or even calibrate it—would disappoint Hargan. And by the looks of her, it did. He added, "Keep in mind—to the world's we've seen, the whole idea's barely a few years old. Hardly explored. There may be solutions we haven't dreamed of." Then her eyes glinted and she smiled.

A MEDICAL TEAM brought Areyn Tuang off *Search*. Jay and Raelle conferred with the head of that team, gave her all the data they'd brought from Waterfall and a summary of the child's condition since leaving the colony, and received assurance that they would be kept informed of all developments. Then Jay wanted to get to a computer terminal and evaluate this Earth. But everyone else pleaded hunger—and to his surprise he found that for the moment he, too, needed food more than information.

Only Telia Hargan ate with them; the rest went elsewhere. Hargan said, "You've been isolated together—we know a large group might be a strain. Now—while we have time to relax, do you have questions?"

Jay shook his head, feeling that only the data banks, not any one individual, could have the facts he needed. But Raelle said, "Our overall question has to be, how closely related to the Earth's we knew, is this one of yours?"

Grinning, Hargan shrugged.

"Whatever comes to mind, ask away."  
Raelle frowned. "Do you know a space officer named Forgues?"

Telia Hargan scratched her cheek; an edge of the butterfly flaked away. After a moment, she nodded. "Sure—the big brain. Oversized head on a small body, almost deformed. He's been gone ten years, in command of *Bear Trap*. Due back in another year or so, with luck. And the scuttle is that if his expedition has any good fortune and returns fairly near to sked, he's closely in line for command of the port."

Raelle gripped Jay's arm. "You see? Even here, where they don't *have* Skip Drive yet, Forgues is on his way to Admiral. And that could indicate . . ."

He patted her hand. "Yes—I know what you're trying to say and I hope you're right. But our hostess can't possibly know all the people we want to check on. So let's drink our coffee and go quiz the local computer terminals."

Hargan looked surprised, but she said, "I'm ready when you are."

IN THE BOOTH, the keyboard closely resembled an outmoded model Jay had learned in school a decade ago. The anachronism bothered him—he made errors and irritably canceled them.

First he stayed with data in large—impersonal matters. And except for lack of Skip Drive he found that this Earth paralleled his own, remarkably.

What colonies had this timeline seeded, and how advanced were they? Waterfall, Mossback, and of course Second Chance—all the nearer ones he could remember were active and in good order. He paused to realize that these reports came from sublight travel. Expeditions might

now be returning from worlds he knew about, that this Earth as yet did not. He nodded—the pattern boded well.

Raelle interrupted him; he deactivated the terminal. Arms around his neck, she said, "I'm here, Jay! Off Earth at the moment, training to leave on the longest expedition to date. But not lifting for another month or so—I'll have time to meet me again!"

He kissed her, then said, "If they have any sense, it won't leave until they've added Skip units."

And Raelle said, "Proably not. But it's the meeting that counts, not the length of it."

She left, then, to follow her own curiosities, and Jay carefully pursued his own. Setra Tuang was gone to Waterfall—her sister Sualna was also scheduled to go, but not soon. He recorded Sualna's location and access code; there was no reason to disturb this alternate of the woman—not yet, not while Areyn's fate was still in doubt. Though *this* Sualna had no such child.

And now he faced what he had been avoiding. He punched for data on Harwood and Glenna Pearsall—did his parents exist, here?

Yes: They had gone to space on a planet-hunting expedition. He scanned ahead—they had returned, and safely! The current data—he read it carefully and shook his head in wonder. As a result of time dilation in sublight travel the two were fifteen years short of their natural, chronological ages—and they had left the Space arm for ground duty. He read no more.

FOR A TIME Jay sat. Then he switched to the communication net

and punched for the address code of Junior Commander Harwood Pearsall. Waiting, he wondered what he could possibly say to this man. For a moment his finger rested on the "Cancel" key—but he did not push it.

The screen lit. Jay saw the father he had known when he was perhaps six or seven years old—and thought, *he doesn't age much.*

"Yes?" The older man spoke without warmth, granting an unknown caller no prerogatives. Jay tried to think—how to breach that coldness?

Finally, "I—please, be patient—but may I speak with your wife, also?"

On the screen, the face, puzzlement. "I don't recognize you."

"I know you don't—you can't—but it's important. Please . . ."

Woody Pearsall squinted. "There's a familiar look to you, somehow. I'll grant you five minutes. Wait, now."

"Of course." The man left the screen's view. Jay waited, and after a time Harwood Pearsall returned. With him came a woman from Jay's dreams.

Glenna—his mother as she *had* been—walked with assurance and pride. Her long bright hair bounced in the wild, leaping curls Jay remembered only from early childhood. Her smooth complexion bore a faint flush, as from recent exercise.

She said, "The king of the mountain will be along as soon as he's washed his face and hands. Now, Woody—and you at the other end, who maybe I know and maybe I don't—what's this all about?"

Her husband said, "He's the one who called. You're not sure whether you know him?"

Her remembered gesture—one fingertip to the tiny mole beside her eye—melted Jay's feelings. All planning failed him; he said, "I know you—you don't know me. But at the port—they can tell you. Telia Hargan? And the black man—one of their top people—I don't remember his name."

"I know it," said Harwood Pearsall, "and I know Hargan, also. If you—" He turned to meet the rush of the small boy who came laughing and leaped into his arms. Pearsall grunted and caught his balance. "Well—whoever you are, meet the rest of the family. Our son Jay, age six. And isn't it about time you introduced yourself?"

Unable to speak, Jay stared at the three. *Now I understand what Raelle felt. And then, here I stay!*

He cleared his throat. "You're going to find this a little hard to believe. . . ."

—F. M. BUSBY

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### ON SALE NOW IN SEPT. FANTASTIC

THE ISLANDS OF TIME by JACK DANN, THE WHISPERERS by RICHARD A. LUPOFF, FLEUVE RED by ROBERT F. YOUNG, INDIGESTION by BARRY N. MALZBERG, THE LADY OF FINNIGANS HEATH by PARKE GODWIN, TOM O'BEDKAN'S NIGHT OUT by DARRELL SCHWEITZER, WITH GOOD INTENTIONS by F. X. MILHAUS, and many new features.

John Shirley made his debut in these pages with "What He Wanted," a story in which he explored the counter-culture of the future. Now he takes a different tack and unveils for us the art of the humanequin, as seen from the—

# SHADOW OF A SNOWSTORM

JOHN SHIRLEY

Illustrated by STEPHEN E. FABIAN

*I would rather paint a man's eyes than  
a cathedral.*

—VAN GOGH

SHE HAD NEVER seen a snowstorm. But the snowstorm whirled through her head spinning flakes into drifts. She wanted to be a cloud of the snowstorm, and she tried to imagine its icy, pristine wind clinging to her in a second skin of white. She saw only a whirlpool of lacy white; a throat of snow muscled by grey clouds. The snowstorm would hurt at first. . .

"YOU FLINCHED!" A sharp male reprimand. She brushed the snowstorm aside and flicked her eyes to the right without moving her head. It was the inspector. She blinked three times. That meant NO in the humanequin code.

"Yes, oh yes you did. Yes, you moved and you shivered too. You are simply breaking the pose."

She tried to keep from swallowing

or showing other signs of nervousness. The inspector was watching so closely now that even swallowing would be considered an imposture. But his watching made her want to move. That's not fair, she thought. He does that deliberately. He wants me to get agitated. But if I do I'll lose the pose and lose my job. Relax. . . *Be poised on the edge.*

The humanequin inspector was a wrinkled little man with eyes bulging from his head like over-ripe fruit. He stared at her as a snake would, and for a moment she thought that when he blinked his eyelids came only from below like those of a reptile. He shook his head and jowls like ornaments. "Remember," he said petulantly, "you should be between motions. Like a diver on the end of the diving board. But *you* stand stiff as if you'd just finished a movement. You should be between motions, and *poised*. Do you think this store employs you solely because of the FBME? Hardly. Since you are new here—"

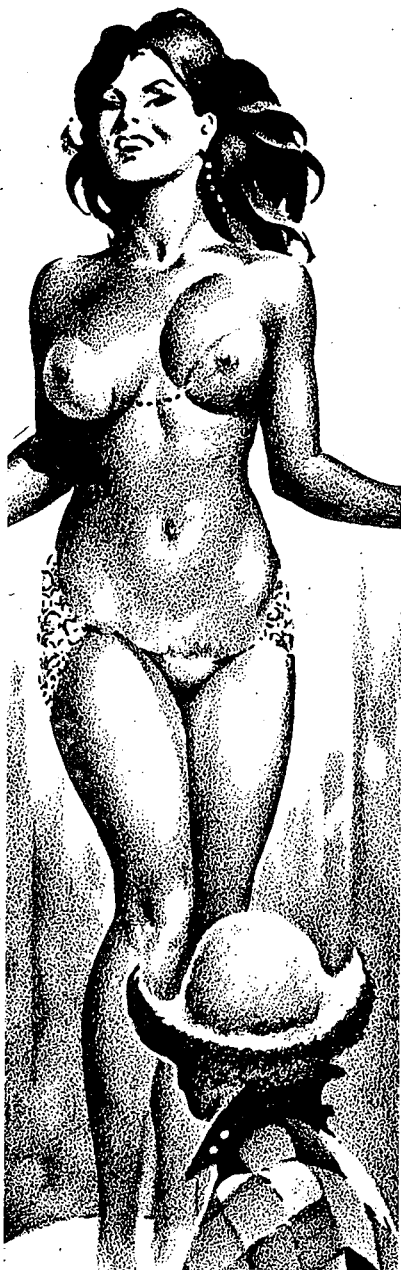


He stopped speaking and rummaged through a large side-pocket in his orange checkered jacket.

This is it, she thought. One of his famous speeches. I should have known I wouldn't get out of it.

The humanequin inspector cleared his throat and read from a small paisly-jacketed book. A crowd of customers gathered, snickering, hoping to see her break from pose. She was battered by their stares.

The inspector was reading: "...in February of 1985 the Federal Bureau of Mandatory Employment, dedicated to finding constructive occupations for all Americans, decreed that department stores and any agencies or corporations using replicas of human beings shall replace them with those of the mass of the unemployed deemed suitable and trained by the bureau. HIP Stores, however, anticipated the need to create jobs in an overpopulated nation and was already in the process of preparing such a program when the regulation was instituted. HIP Stores has always been strongly aware of the needs of the American people and was more than happy to comply. But there is a greater purpose in the employment of humanequins superceding mere legal conformity—" The inspector paused and looked around meaningfully. But most of the crowd had fled from boredom, and the new humanequin seemed inattentive. He frowned but continued, "...we use them because they're more realistic, more engaging to the eye than dummies. They alone can do justice to the high quality and carefully tailored standards of the fashions offered by HIP Stores. They are trained to be a compliment to the buyer and a testimony to the sincerity with which we design our products. Further, humanequins



contrast the sterility unfairly associated with manufactured clothing. . . .” The inspector stopped reading and glowered at her, searching out cracks in her stereotyped calm. “I think you get the idea. I’ll let your imposture go this time since you are a newcomer. But remember: You work here because your function is intended to be esthetically pleasing, not because of the law. There are more than enough applicants who would be delighted to have your job, and HIP Stores employ only humanequins who are artists, not people who have nothing to do but stand still for three hours.”

Bullshit, she thought. You’ve got nothing to do but lecture me. They don’t need a humanequin inspector. You’re here because you had nothing to do. She ached to say it out loud. But she blinked: *Yes Sir.*

I can feel his eyes on my breasts, she thought. That’s why he applied for that job. Because he can stare at female humanequins for as long as he likes without being called a sexist. *Don’t get angry*, she warned herself, or you’ll break the pose and lose your first job ever.

Her first job, except for the teaching assistance at the Catholic school where she’d been raised after her parents were killed by the witch hunters at the annual Inquisition. She felt that twelve years of maintaining her composure at the Catholic school had conveniently prepared her for humanequinism.

The inspector was still there, she realized. He hovered just out of sight behind her.

“You’re breathing heavily,” he said suddenly, in a whine like an overworked vacuum cleaner. “Remember, breathe only through the nose, take as long as possible for each breath so

that your chest moves only fractionally. And for Heaven’s Sake, you’re *sweating*. You should apply your anti-perspirant more thoroughly. Your makeup is smeared. And don’t forget to join the humanequin guild. We make it a policy to employ only guild humanequins. As you perhaps recall, I hired you with the understanding that you would join the guild within a week after beginning work. Your week ends tomorrow. There is a guild meeting tonight.” He stalked away.

When she was sure that he was gone she allowed herself a short sigh. Then she remembered the other humanequin up the aisle. She looked at him out of the corners of her eyes. Moving, her eyes felt like freely roving birds, perhaps building a nest in her skull. Their slight movement melted the racks of hosiery across from her into groves of trees. A man was standing there, amongst the trees, a black man clad in a white toga and silvery briefs. His pose was sharp and dramatic captured in the swift movement of hands upraised as if about to catch a ball. His eyes were on something imaginary in the air and he wore an anticipatory grin.

Her vision of the imaginary forest vanished, leaving the black humanequin surrounded by racks of hosiery and togas.

His arms in the air! she mused, how difficult that must be to maintain. But he’s muscular. The pose arbiter wouldn’t assign a stance he was unprepared for.

A line from the humanequin handbook drifted past on the current of memory: . . . *any given pose has an emotional response corresponding to it in the model.* . . .

His pose would make me feel cheated, she thought, to be always waiting for the ball that never comes.

Perhaps she would talk to him after the guild meeting, ask him how he felt about the pose. What would it be like to make it with an experienced humanequin? Maybe he would lapse into a pose when he climaxed. Better not ask him a lot of questions or he'll tell everyone I'm an amateur. He'd probably report me if he saw me move.

It was only the beginning of the second hour of her shift but already her muscles ached with inactivity. She decided to practice systematic activation. Slowly, one by one, she flexed the muscles in her right foot without slipping from pose. The difficulty was in flexing without visibly moving the limb. Carefully, doing her best to leave none out, she proceeded up her leg, tightening and relaxing each muscle as long as she could stand it.

Woven into her muscles and tendons, wound around nerves and wrapped over bones: tension blocked her control. She wanted to break down and cry. Think in terms of the store and you'll be comfortable in the store, she reminded herself.

She was dimly aware that while in pose she lived in either of two worlds: the first was a world of anxiety founded in humanequin duties; there, in the pose, carnivorous tension coiled and constricted like barbwire in the Hardware Department. In the second world, fantasies haunted her limbs like the ghosts of extinct animals. There had to be a rectitude between the two. Soon. If she descended further into the second world she would lose herself in the snowstorm. When she warily took a few trial steps into the first world its tensions threatened to drive her back, deeper into the snowstorm. The tension manifested as a frame hanging

without its picture in second floor's Interior Decoration and a birdcage without a bird in Pets and Pet Care, fourth floor—both objects demanding their vacancies be filled. Bottles of No-Doz seethed in Drugs and the archery bows in Sporting Goods were strung too tightly—both objects begged to relax. So mentally she put a picture of the genii-bikini in the frame, a bird in the cage, smashed the bottles and unstrung the bows.

Psychosomatic blocks to systematic activation temporarily removed, she proceeded into her right thigh and up her side.

When she flexed the muscles in the lower part of her back she felt a sharp pang in her bladder. She needed to urinate. With an effort she controlled it, and the pang subsided.

Another disturbance crept into her loins on the heels of her regard of the black humanequin. She was becoming aroused.

It's been four days, she thought. I should have taken care of that last night. But Bruce was all that was available and he's a Brillo pad (from Housekeeping, first floor) and he touched me like he was trying to scrape me clean. Hell with him. Use a vibrator booth.

But the warmth crept lower and asserted itself. She tried to distract herself by flexing her muscles as hard as she could bear it. Her sensations were HIP Stores elevators held by overloaded cables—about to snap. A cable snapped, the urge melted over the knot of pain in her bladder.

Don't strain, she warned herself, it makes you sweat. Her mouth twitched once at the effort at self-control. Had anyone seen? Someone might report her and the inspector would return with his sticky, clinging eyes.

He should wear his eyes around his neck like pearls, she thought.

Don't think about that.

She rehearsed posture attitudes and exercises from the Humanequin Handbook:

1) *Poised like a bird about to leap into flight.*

2) *Flying like a jet, everything stilled but the feeling of being airborne.*

3) *Not a sculpture, sculptures are frozen. You are the captured epitome of motion. A single frame from a motion picture filmstrip.*

4) *Hummingbird in a cage!*

5) *Say to yourself: I am a work of art. I am not a department store dummy. But I am a pose. I am the perfect image of every person's ideal self. It is my responsibility to the customers to be a picture of their happiness.*

She reaffirmed her smile, hoping that no one noticed the adjustment.

She tried to picture her pose. As Per Procedure she pictured first a woman conscious of her clothes as much as her body. Her feet were planted firmly but the left one was behind and slightly lifted at the heel as if just beginning another step. Her hands were swinging, each frozen slightly upraised with the rhythm of an imaginary stride. Her smile was content and lively. But the eyes were the hard part. They revealed too much. When she struggled to exact their expression they seemed to draw apart from her like small animals crouching in the hollows of her cheekbones. She wore a genii-bikini with its transparent filmy blue top like the tinge of frozen skin. The thin panties, blue lace, were stylistically low-cut disclosing a tuft of honey-brown pubic hair at their band.

The pose reminded her of a victim of smog asphyxiation she had once seen collapsed on the corner. The

scantly clad young woman had fallen unconsciously into a loose genii-bikini pose where she lay on the grimy sidewalk.

The comparison almost made her grimace, but she caught herself. Tension was submerged in another fantasy. The snowstorm kissed her wetly.

A long time later one of the baser howls of the blizzard wind became the voice of her replacement.

"You can cut loose now Sandra, it's my turn." Sandra saw that the curtain over the dais was closed. She relaxed with a shudder.

"You didn't even notice when we put the curtain up," the woman said.

Sandra rotated her head to loosen stiff muscles in her neck and gazed gratefully at the enclosing black curtains. She wanted to sleep. She would go to sleep as soon as she got home, even if she had to take trunks to relax.

The Store covered the transition from one humanequin to another with black curtains, like sleep.

Curious, Sandra thought, that watching a humanequin change positions was thought perverse. If my mother were alive she'd declare that the dildo vibrator section on the fifth floor is dirty. She'd think the erotic photos adorning the sixth floor's Intimate Apparel were perverse.

Sandra stretched, wincing at the cramp in her right shoulder. As she stepped down from the platform her metabolism caught up with the abrupt change in position. Hot flashes seared up her back. Her vision darkened and here eyes smarted.

The new humanequin took a deep breath as she took her place. Her expression softened, reformed into that of a woman walking gaily down the street—poised. There was no expression in her eyes other than that of her posture. The woman blinking her

eyes quickly four times for *open the curtains*.

Sandra walked behind the platform and drew on her coat, the corduroy fabric seeming abrasive against her bared skin. She opened the curtains with a pull cord and several shoppers, two of them fat old women spilling out of their own genii-bikinis went *ahhh* as the curtains parted. An adolescent boy made a loud remark about the possibilities of satisfactory sex with the replacement model. Everyone laughed. The humanequin didn't alter her expression even slightly. Her affectation was smugly tight like the rope around the condemned man's neck just before. . .

Poised.

On the edge.

Balanced on the high wire.

About to—

Not *quite*—

Just prior—

Poised.

Admiring the new humanequin Sandra told herself: *It is an art*. Don't put it down because you can't do it right, because you have to be a nun among humanequins.

The thought of the guild made her curl her lips with disgust. They're not a guild, she thought, they're a cult. No choice. No sleep. No options. No sleep.

The numbness in her legs shattered like surf cascading over rocks as she walked away from the dais. She had never been to the sea but a tidal wave roared through her mind tossing black curtains of saltwater. Stacks of boxes and products on all sides resembled barnacled rocks; people surged between the rocks like otters. The otters surrounded her and urged her downward, safely under the roaring storm to where dark currents danced her back and forth—

EXIT

She blinked at the exit sign, then glanced quickly around her. Scurrying shoppers and a Security Smile. The Security Smile was a robot four feet high scanning for shoplifters and other deviant activity. It was controlled by an operator watching through its television eyes from a remote cubby in the building. The robot had a huge round yellow "happy face", a remnant of the seventies. Its face was just two oblong holes for eyes behind which twin cameras gleamed, and a painted arc of a smile.

The robot was watching her. Has the inspector told it to keep an eye on me? she wondered. But the robot made no move to come closer so she stepped onto the down escalator. She felt like running. She caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror. As she watched, her reflection sank, her features becoming fluid, draining down the mirror like water through a gutter grate. Her brown hair wreathing narrow shoulders, her amber eyes, small pointed nose, pink-edged lips too small, chin just weak enough so that she could never rate an Inner Stance beauty—she sank into the floor. She bit her lips and looked down at the lingerie products on the floor that rose to meet her. There was a humanequin modeling lace panties just to the right of the escalator as she stepped off. The same boy who had jeered at Sandra's upstairs replacement approached this humanequin and overtly pinched her right nipple. The model didn't alter its facial depiction but the nipple stiffened slightly. The boy grinned. A security robot whirled up behind him on silent rollers, extended a pincered limb from its chest-cavity and picked the boy up by the shirt collar. The boy yelped and whined:

"Hey cut it out!"

The Security Smile, its smooth stainless steel cylindrical body glistening, a reflection of the dangling child on its chest in curved distortion, carried the offender away. The boy was jerked about on the robot's arm like the condemned man in the noose as the trapdoor drops away beneath him.

Before her parents had died Sandra loved to watch old westerns on television. After she was consigned to the Catholic school she wasn't allowed to watch TV, but she vividly remembered the hangings of outlaws, and the painted ladies in their hoopskirts and parasols, composed like posing humanequins, watching the execution.

She walked slowly home, wishing they would design a squaredance gown that she might model at work.

AT 8 PM when she arrived at the gold door of the humanequin guild hall she presented her HIP Stores card and was admitted after donning a black robe. The robe was floor length and made of the same material as the curtains that covered humanequin transferrals. The room was smaller than she had expected, with only about sixty black-robed humanequins out of pose as much as they ever were, men and women sitting quietly. They were silent, watching a stage with curtains of the familiar black cloth. As she sat down in the back row the curtain rolled away to reveal two humanequins, a man and a woman, nude, in postures of people running away from one another. They adorned opposite sides of the stage. Ornaments. From a slit in another curtain behind them came a tall, well-muscled man of the sort seen modeling men's underwear in catalogues. He wore a fashionable velvet green suit and an engaging

smile.

"Don't move," he said, according to ritual, "We are the bodies of the products, and it is our responsibility as products to remain stationary but poised, waiting for application. Let them stare. We are the mental cosmetic."

"*We are the mental cosmetic*", came the audience's chorused litany.

Another man came from the wings at stage right. He was older, graying but solid and sure of himself. Sandra recognized him as the guild president; he had never been a humanequin. "Well spoken," he rumbled, "A round of applause for Mr. Ackerman." There was sporadic clapping. "Mr. Ackerman has completed all the requirements and tonight will be purified so that he is fit to be a member of the Inner Stance of the guild." Applause. Ackerman bowed. "First we will make Mr. Ackerman complete by removing that portion of him which is a stumbling block to his total realization of the Inner Stance of the guild of humanequins." He gestured pontifically and two men all in white wheeled an operating table and a rack of complex chrome and plastic equipment onto the stage. The room became darker, a spotlight opaqued the goggles of the doctors and made their equipment shine like the involuted byways and freeways and towers of a city miniaturized by distance.

Ackerman removed his clothing, folded it in a neat pile, and laid himself on the table. One of the men in white injected him with an anesthetic. While waiting for the drug to take effect the guild president said: "Mr. Ackerman has exhibited total congruence with the products he represents, and at no time did he give indication of awareness of other than his posture and his product." Applause. "While



we're waiting for Mr. Ackerman's preparation I've brought along some pertinent diversion in the form of a newsreel. . . ." The lights went dim and a screen whirled down in front of the operating table. The president left the stage as the film began and a voice said:

" . . . Eric Leipzig, one of the seminal founding fathers of the conceptualist movement in art—an approach advocating that anything in the artist's immediate environment becomes art when he declares it to be—has given up his manhole cover constructs to take conceptualism's minimalist mode to its ultimate extreme. His new work, which he says was inspired by the guild of humanequins, whom he openly admires, is himself. Leipzig signed papers authorizing an optimum lobotomy last Friday night. After the operation Sunday morning he was permanently placed in the Leipzig collection of the Museum of Modern Art. As he is now a human vegetable as well as the embodiment of Art, he must be fed and changed daily by a special detail assigned to the museum staff—"

The film showed Leipzig smiling and shaking hands as he signed papers. It cut to a shot of his lax face profiled against his famous bottlecap construct. He sits limply in a padded chair staring stupidly into space, one arm swinging loosely at his side, his mouth leaking drool. The voice explains that he has had a double lobotomy, completely imbecilizing—but the film is cut short and the lights flash on. The screen rolled itself into the ceiling and the president returned, smiling enigmatically.

"We're ready," one of the surgeons said, standing by the prostrate Ackerman.

Sandra had not noticed the people

beside her until she turned to the man seated at her right and asked, "Are they going to do it *here*?" She bit her lip when she saw that the man she was whispering at was the same black who held the pose across from her on the third floor of HIP Store 34.

"Obviously," the man replied impatiently. "Don't look so worried. They're not going to cut off his balls or anything. They'll mess about with some nerve ends and deaden a few. . . ." He appraised her with street-black eyes for many moments after he spoke. "But maybe you ought to forget about the guild, kid. I shouldn't discourage you if its what you really want to do but—The president is looking over here. Shhh."

The guild president was looking directly at Sandra. She pretended to be interested in the operation. The surgeons withdrew a shining silver needle from the incision in Ackerman's crotch. They sewed it up. Ackerman, eyes sleepy, was still smiling.

"Mr. Ackerman, after serving flawlessly in the guild of humanequins for four years, has achieved the Inner Stance." The president intoned. "Even when he is not in mannequin-pose he is always posing. He is always poised." There was applause and the two humanequins on the stage changed poses simultaneously and knelt, arms raised in symbolic supplication.

Now there was no sound in the audience. There were no whispers, no coughs, no clearing throats.

The surgeon wheeled Ackerman from the room and the posing humanequins returned to their original ornamentations.

"And now," the president said, "I believe we have a newcomer."

Everyone in the room turned and stared at Sandra. She wanted to cry

out under the impact of so many stares but she knew that would have marked her for failure as a humanequin. She stood, her hands seeking one another's clasp, defensively over her belly.

"Your name is Sandra Newcombe, is it not?"

"Yes, yes it is."

"How long have you been working for HIP Stores?"

"About a week and a half."

"Have you ever worked for HIP Stores before or been a member of another chapter of a humanequin guild?"

"No. Never."

"Are you fully aware that being a humanequin is an art?"

"Yes. Certainly. Definitely."

"How long did you train before you started work at HIP number thirty-four?"

"About three months."

"Are you fully aware of the initiation exercises and examinations involved in becoming a guild member?"

"I . . . well, no, I don't know much about that part."

"You will be asked to undergo a series of postures in rapid succession before the attendant guild. You will also be asked to endure a test of resistance to outward stimulation of your sexual organs while in posture as a demonstration of your endurance and dedication to the humanequin ideal. Are you prepared?"

She hesitated and glanced down at the black man beside her. His face was as impassive as the rest. But when she looked into his eyes he turned away.

She felt as if each member of the silent audience awaiting her decision had a finger on her face testing for any anomalous emotional twitch. She imagined the president pointing to

portions of her face as if it were a television weather map. The tv weatherman was marking woodgrain patterns on the black outlines of states. The loops he drew across the map were the red marks the audience's fingers left on her skin; whorls of high-pressure, low-pressure, cold front, warm front: fingerprint marks from their gropings. The mapped nation suffered from a cold front coming from the south: her loins. The newscasters, as impersonal as humanequins, had fashionable hairdos, and mirror ties and triple-notched lapels on their velvet suits, wire-rim glasses and shards in their eyes. She was brought rudely from the fancy by the president's impatient:

"Are you *with* us? Have you decided, Miss Newcombe?"

*She could feel the eyes of the audience pulsing in their sockets, sucked close to their skulls by the vacuum inside. Their eyes rearranging her features like flowers in a vase. The crowd around the gallows staring from the safety of their Sunday best in the Old West's Virginia City?*

She bit her lip; she debated silently in the passing of four seconds: If she didn't hold the job she'd either end up in the apartment which was clenched with too many people like the balled fingers of a fist or she'd have to go to the Excess Zone, the haven for the surplus population with nothing to do. She'd spent days in the Excess Zone before the humanequin job finding a hypnotic peace in milling from one level to another in the vast concrete and glass building. In the Excess Zone no one has a face. Here, at least humanequins are given a face.

"Go ahead," Sandra said to the president of the guild. He took a sheaf of papers from a side pocket and

handed them to an aide who stepped briskly from the wings of the stage to carry them, with a pen, to where Sandra waited in the aisle.

"Sign these then. They release us from any legal responsibility should you harm yourself physically or emotionally while being tested."

She signed:

"Now. Come with me to the stage."

She followed him, feeling the head of every person on the audience swivel to watch her.

If I don't get used to being stared at, she thought, I'll never be a humanequin. I'll be stuck in the Excess Zone.

She mounted the stage after the older man and looked at her feet, or pretended to examine her hands clasped in front of her, rather than face the constellation of staring eyes. The aide took the papers backstage.

"To begin, Larry!" The president barked. He stood at Sandra's right holding the papers she'd signed like Moses' tablets. One of the humanequins flanking the stage shed his pose, stretched quickly, then strutted to Sandra's side looking attentive. "Larry will give you your poses, Sandra. You'll have to imitate him as closely as possible."

"But he—" she started to protest, forgetting herself.

"Yes. . . he's a *man* isn't he? Very perceptive of you," interrupted the president sarcastically, "But that is a deliberately imposed obstacle you are required to overcome. Do you possess a license for public nudity?"

"Yes, but—"

"Take off your clothes." Mutely she began to remove first her robe and underneath, the yellow pantaloons and see-through blouse.

"Everything's set," the president said when she was naked. "Go ahead,

Larry. 'Pose-don't-move.'"

Instantly Larry snapped into an exaggerated masculine bearing. He wore a neanderthal expression as he crouched low, like a football player about to spring for a tackle. His hands were outstretched, brutishly groping. Sandra followed suit, crouching, flexing back and shoulder muscles. She added a grimace. Unsteady, she slipped slightly from pose, then forced herself back. But her hands trembled. She realized that she must look absurd, and that they had intended it to be that way. Her eyes watered when the overhead lights grew brighter. Someone tilted a lamp towards her face. She flinched.

Larry suddenly shifted his position. He was now in an Atlas-like stance, back bent and arms upraised as if supporting a heavy weight. Unused to shifting poses so quickly, Sandra's imitation was inexact. . . but she had looked at Larry too much already. The pose made her feel ancient, that it might be best to give up and find the nearest place to sleep, a very old woman struggling to climb a hill.

"Your feet are wrong," the president admonished coolly. "Try another pose, Larry."

Larry melted from one aspect to another with alarming rapidity. He seemed to take no time at all to readjust. He became a stalwart pioneer figure, one hand shading his eyes, eyes sharply peering, back straight.

It looked easy. But in attempting the rapid transit from the last posture to this she twisted muscles in her back. She drew her breath in sharply as the pain tried to yank tears free.

Desperately she strove to recall the mental posture exercises:

*Poised like a bird. . .*

—the bird exploded as it passed the muzzle of the hunter's gun. He shot it

at close range and its head went flying one way, its wings the other.

*Flying like a jet. . .*

—the jet, just as it was about to touch down, ducked its snout and nosed into the ground, crumpling the entire forward section. The tail whipped off and flipped over the nose of the jet, crushing an airport fire engine.

*Not a sculpture, sculptures are frozen. . .*

—she was stiff, cold, aching with immobility. She wanted to move, to leave the pose but could not. Her muscles would not relax. A man with a chisel came at her. He split her down the middle. She screamed and fell to the floor.

*Fainted.*

The president helped her to stand, but even leaning against him her knees were shaking. There was a stabbing pain in her legs. When she could stand without support she was again staggered by the audience. Every face was silent and expressionless. The president passed a small vial of amyl nitrate under her nose. Her eyes widened. She straightened as the pain passed from her head leaving a wake of chill. She laughed, suddenly elated.

"Let's have a hand for Sandra," the president said. Applause.

I can do it, Sandra thought. Or I can keep from doing the wrong thing. Or—

"Sandra," the older man said in a kindly tone. "Can you pose now?"

"Sure. I can do it."

"Then assume your pose assigned for work."

Sandra took a deep breath, relaxed, shifted, picturing the genii-bikini pose as vividly as she was able. She was surprised at the ease of the adjustment; she fell into the posture as eas-

ily as she would hang a coat on a hook.

"You're smiling a little too much. Pleased with yourself?" The president asked. She loosened the smile slightly. "Better. Now. Inspector."

The humanequin inspector for HIP Store 34 came from stage left. He held something in a hand but she couldn't make out just what it was without moving her head. "Don't break posture no matter what, Sandra." The guild president said. "Be poised, be nothing but your product's champion."

But Sandra was thinking of the stumpy humanequin inspector's pawing eyes. He has a face like a big navel, she thought. He's going to touch me and he's got white powder on his hands; I've seen it before, he smears it on everything he touches. It must be some kind of poison. . .

But the humanequin inspector didn't touch her with his hands. He came at her from the side, sidling up close enough so that she could feel his humid breath on her arm. She felt a cold and metallic nudge against her belly, just below the arch of her rib cage. The metal thing vibrated, gently but rapidly pummeling her skin like the inspector's thoughts about touching her. She felt the steel electric vibrator get warmer, as it moved back and forth over her waist like a spider on its web, spiraling up, circling her breasts, over her nipples. But as yet it was no more intrusive than the eyes watching her at work, hoping that she would break posture. Still, she held the pose as simply as water conforms to the shape of a pitcher. She pictured the pitcher, cold and smooth and brittle; the buzzing vibrator touched its glass and rattled, skipping over it, making sparks, scraping particles of silicon as it whined. Pain

exploded from the strain of control. Pain just behind her eyes. *Now my eyes are trying to get out*, she thought, *to join the inspector's.*

The vibrator ran down the belly and shuddered effusively on her pubic mound—she stiffened involuntarily. The humanequin inspector chuckled quietly to himself like a rat squeaking in its sleep.

She winced. The glass was cracking.

Does he really think this is erotic? she wondered frantically. No, he knows I hate it. It feels like he's slapping me. The friction feels like it's tearing skin away. Is that supposed to arouse me? No, no. They're teaching the endurance that comes with humiliation.

She felt the metal press against her clitoris, producing sandpaper pain. The vibrator beat against her dully, like an insistent knocking on a door. *The knuckles that knocked grew raw and bloody as no one answered; after hours of knocking the white knucklebone poked through the ripped skin, chipped itself on the door.*

She felt the humanequin inspector's breath on her pubic mound. It made her skin crawl. Nausea welled up in her and tried to incite her stomach into vomiting. He pressed the vibrator brutally against the bone of her mons veneris. Her arms wavered and drooped as she fought the urge to tear the biting metal off. She felt like a silent movie heroine in an early western tied to a conveyor belt in a sawmill. The spinning saw was just then biting between her legs. They never got that far in the movies, she thought through the mounting waves of anguish.

"Okay inspector, that will do." the guild president's voice, soothing, "You can cut loose now, Sandra."

She moaned and bent over double, holding her crotch. Her skin had a palpable blanket thickness; its outer layer encased her like a sarcophagus.

Her senses were wrapped in wax-paper. . . from the Drygoods Department, first floor.

The unenthusiastic applause from the guild shook against her ears like the vibrator against her skin. She coughed, trying to keep from vomiting.

"Congrats and kudos," the inspector said. "You passed. Just barely."

Sandra's body seethed and burned and shone as if it had been covered in molten gold.

IT WAS another mile from the monorail station to HIP Store 34. She was eager to get to work, as if completing the final step of the ritual begun the night before. She thought about the anti-climactic congratulations she had received after being certified a lifetime member of the guild. *A lifetime member.* She shivered. She wondered how soon she could retire.

She was to receive her certificate after work, as soon as the results of her electroencephalogram test (given to her in a curtained black room after the meeting) was run through the computer. *A mere formality*, the president had assured her. Maybe, if she attained the higher pay of Inner Stance humanequin status, she might eventually have enough saved up to rent a *private room*. All to herself.

She hurried through the neon-glazed streets, proudly pushing through night-shift crowds. Arrogantly, she decided to pass unbeguided by the cluster of FBME workers under the next corner's streetlight. But a tall, round shouldered man put one hand to an ear in the sign of the Mandatory Employment worker and

clipped off, "I'm the FBME Clothing Inspector for Sixty-eighth and Cranshaw. I've been assigned to—" Already he was stooping, magnifying glass around his nose, to examine her clothing.

"I've heard that whole rap formula before," she interrupted, "but go ahead, I suppose."

He smiled fatuously. Then, though he was standing in the conical gown of light from the corner lamp he shined a penlight over her clothing. "Whoops! There's one!" he chortled, taking a wrinkle compressor from his pocket. He replaced the penlight in a pocket stitched with *penlight* 8; his rows of pockets were numbered and labeled. He placed a teflon bulb over the minute wrinkle he'd spotted on her sweater's shoulder and pressed a button. The wrinkle had vanished when he lifted the bulb away. "There, that's about all for wrinkles on your clothes as far as I can see. Too bad it can't be done for skin!" He chuckled at his little joke. "If you want the rest of your clothing straightened out, this fellow over here," he stabbed a nicotine-yellowed finger at a squat, bald little man waiting eagerly at his side, "is a specialist at straightening buttons. . . ."

There were four other FBME workers behind the bald man. Probably shoe-lace cappers, shoe-polishers, cuff-reliners, collar-straighteners and spiritual comforters.

"That's okay," Sandra said, "I've had my clothes rearranged three times already tonight."

"Are you quite sure? It's free you know," piped the little man assiduously. "Public service."

"I know, I'm a humanequin. I work for FBME too."

Lowering their eyes respectfully they slipped out of her way.

Humanequins have a certain mystique these days, she thought.

Shouldering through the milling crowd, she glanced at her watch. Seven-thirty. She had forty-five minutes before her shift. The night sky was sullen with smog, given eyes by the lights from the skyscraper apartment buildings zippering the skyline shut.

Most of the crowd here were FBME employees: Public works polishers rubbing down firehydrants and gutter grates. Concrete maintenance men filling cracks in the sidewalk or chipping holes so that they would have holes to fill. Men holding up mirrors so that a pedestrian could easily see if his or her hair was mussed or teeth unbrushed. Sometimes a clothing straightener would rearrange public works polishers while looking at himself in a mirror held by an FBME employee listening to a comforter recite aphorisms. Sometimes these mutual Mandatory Employment interchanges became a chain many blocks long.

An FBME comforter stopped her long enough to mouth one contemporary aphorism: "If we were all as poised as humanequins there would be no fear—there can be no fear where there is no looking backwards. Think about it, citizen."

Sandra left the FBME cluster behind and passed thinner crowds until she came to a small bridge over a strip of inky river emerging briefly from the subterranean tunnels. The city had been compelled by lack of space to build housing that spanned the once impressiye river. It moaned vastly from the dark, steel-barred mouth of the huge cistern. Reflected in the half-mile stretch of exposed river was the monolithic Excess Zone. Sandra looked up into the steel and glass face

of the man-shaped building, remembering from the inside out. The structure was a seventy-seven story likeness of a man from the waist up, spacious features smooth and stylized so that he had hollows instead of eyes, his barrel chest and torso made of lateral strips of clear plasteel. Its insides were patrolled by cops on monowheels, keeping the surging crowds moving and amenable. The crowds sifted from the upper levels to the lower like tickets in a revolving sweepstakes basket, each one waiting for the unseen hand to single it out. Often Sandra had looked out of the parted lips of the Excess Zone building, wishing for some place to go.

Now she stood, hands on the cold railing, watching February clouds gather around the head of the architectural man, until it was time to go to work.

She left the river and hurried up the boulevard until she came to an alley that was her shortcut to HIP Store 34. She was halfway down the dark ravine of concrete when the way was blocked by a young man in a chain-mail jacket. A large battery-powered knife chattered in his fist. His bald head was polychromatically painted. His eyes were dull, like the steely sockets of the Excess man.

"Lay down over there—" he stabbed a finger at a discarded, rotting mattress humped behind a row of garbage cans. "*—now.*"

Reacting with reflex and without really knowing why, she snapped into the genii-bikini pose.

The rapist gaped at her, shocked.

Sandra didn't move. There was no place else to go; and no looking back. There were a few hardened people watching from the sidewalk at the opening of the alley, but she knew she could expect no help from them.

She had taken refuge.

The young man licked his lips and reached out to touch her. His fingers paused less than an inch from the soft skin of her throat.

She didn't move. She knew that it had become part of her now, autonomous as breathing. She wouldn't move even if he cut her. She'd just stand there and bleed, she decided. The knife hummed loudly into her ear.

But the thug drew his hand back.

"Why don't you move?" he asked, a note of panic in his voice. She watched him out of the corner of one eye but remained frozen into the stance of the humanequin pose officially assigned to her by the arbiter.

"Come on," said the mouth behind the knife. "Cut it out or I'll cut it out. Move, cow. Move or something." A look of revulsion swam over his narrow features. He shook his head. Suddenly his hand darted and the sawing, serrated edge of the electric knife bit her upraised right arm. The pain was like an unexpected drop of rain.

She didn't flinch.

He drew the knife away. Blood chased after the edge and flowed down her arm.

She didn't move.

The boy shrieked. He threw the knife down and ran into the choking night. The knife, still turned on, chattered to itself on the sidewalk.

She remained in the pose until the tickling of blood threatened to stain her dress. Then she relaxed.

She took a tube of flesh-tone band-aid paste from her pocket and smeared it over the cut. She daubed the blood away with a handkerchief then smoothed out the fleshy paste with a makeup brush, so that nothing would be noticed while she was in



pose.

**H**IP Store 34 was one mile long and three-quarters of a mile wide. It included groceries, drygoods, hardware, nutrient bars, car parts, chicken parts, drugs, clothes of every sort, imports, sensual accessories, souvenirs, furniture, and it trained and featured the 'most dedicated humanequins available'.

On the second floor the products were gathered on the shelves like a bivouacked army awaiting the signal to attack. There, on Sandra's right, were pens bunched thickly upright and crowded together like the eleven people who shared her apartment room. There was a cylindrical revolving rack of sunglasses, rows of mysteriously peering shades watching her suspiciously like the guild-members' eyes. Tables of bargain-priced clothing tossed loosely together like a mouth full of jumbled words. The clothes were obscene, to Sandra, because they had not the faintest hint of a posture and their tags were wantonly exposed. Mascara packages, each one with a photo of a pair of perfect eyes (rows of accusing eyes ready to swim away if startled) a school of eyes with mascara fins.

Sandra came to her modeling dais and closed the curtains around the humanequin who was already there. She got down immediately, stretched, did some quick exercises, pulled on her coat and left without amenities.

With the opening of the curtain Sandra was ready. Sandra would always be ready.

A television was turned on at a demonstration across from her. A bearded newscaster was saying:

"And due to the rising popularity of humanequins, many celebrities have taken up humanequin posing at

home. Humanequins have a special significance to many modern Americans, even to the extent that they have largely replaced the old idols, movie stars and rock singers. Mayor Changly, of New York practices amateur humanequinism at home. . . . (Sandra glimpsed a TV shot of Changly with one foot in the air and hands outstretched to the sides, an attempt at an expression of nobility on his doughy face. He wavered slightly but retained the pose fairly well, Sandra noted with a professional eye, ". . . and aging publishing tycoon Hugh Hefner finds amateur humanequinism—" A shot of Hefner saying: "More fulfilling than anything else I've tried.")

"And Doctor T. Mignon Kinesoto of the University of Oregon compares the practice to 'a sort of behaviora yoga'. Kinesoto also claims that any facial expression unrelated to surface thoughts still corresponds with some inner compulsion so that humanequinism offers itself to psychoanalysts as a viable method for shaping personality from the outside rather than through the less direct techniques of behaviorists. . . . In any case, despite the usual doomcriers who claim that the fad is dangerous humanequinism has definitely caught hold of the American Public and it looks like it's not going to let go!"

Someone switched off the TV. I was the black man who normally occupied the dais across from her.

"I want to talk to you, Sandra," he whispered, pretending to look at the table of wallets to her right. He looked around to see if the inspector was nearby. They were alone aside from a few oblivious shoppers. "You don't know me except for when we talked last night at the meeting. My name is Francis Ellemen. I've been

watching you from my stand for as long as you've worked here. I can tell you don't fit in here. And you hate the inspector like everyone else does. Anyway, I'm getting scared. I heard the guild president talking to the inspector last night. This thing is getting out of hand. They want to start preaching humanequinism like a religion. Like everyone will *have* to do it three times a day. I can barely take it once a day, anymore. I've worked here for a long time, and I began to realize I had no idea *how* long. When you can't remember how long you've worked some place, that's *too* long. I'm quitting and I think. . . ." His eyes were level with hers, though the dais elevated her ten inches. He was very tall and formidable—but for an instant he looked helpless and embarrassed as he sought words. ". . . I think you should go with me. There's no real reason why you should waste any more of your time here. I've saved up a lot of credit. . . ."

She glanced down at Francis, mostly to assure herself that this was more than another fantasy.

Maybe, she thought. He's been a humanequin for a long time. Maybe he knows something I don't. No. His hands shake like the vibrator and I'm sure he has the white poison powder hidden on the underside of his fingers. . . .

She blinked her eyes three times: NO.

"Are you sure?" He looked directly at her now, and he raised his voice until she became afraid someone would hear. "I think we can help each other. If you stay here much longer you won't need anyone's help. That's really dangerous, not needing—"

Maybe he's working for the inspector, she thought, and he's trying to talk me into breaking down. Another

test.

But Francis shook his head resignedly and walked quietly away.

Sandra shook off the mounting tension.

Think about your pose, she told herself. She tightened the posture slightly in an attempt to draw more attention to the geni-bikini than to herself. But she reiterated the advice of the humanequin handbook: 'The picture of the model on the product's package is the product that is offered.'

Three middle-aged women came by, stopping to stare. Sandra felt their eyes crawling over her bare midriff, eyes hot and moist, jelly-orbs revolving in slick sockets. Out of the corner of her eyes she thought she saw the eyeballs crawl from the hollow sockets of the shoppers, to drop on strands of ectoplasm to the floor. Sandra's haunting tension called the eyeballs closer. They were followed by the tongues and fingers of the shoppers, detached and travelling freely, eyes, tongues and fingers rolling or creeping or slithering onto the platform and up her legs. She shivered, flexed her muscles as hard as she could without dropping the pose. The members fell away; the illusion left; the shoppers left.

But the inspector had come by to look at her.

Sandra became acutely aware of the soreness between her legs.

She wanted to tell him how much she'd like to tear his gaze away from her. She tried to listen to the background music played somewhere in the vast department store. But the muzak was slashed into distorted segments by the chatter of shoppers and the clatter of cash registers. Sandra was an illusion of stasis like a whirling electric fan, spinning blades that would cut off your fingers if you

tried to touch the seemingly solid disk they made.

The inspector was still watching her.

She wanted to roll up into herself like the telescopic belts in section E or burn his eyes with the hot skin liniment from Drugs. She wanted to cover her face with hosiery to make it flat and ugly so he'd turn away.

The inspector was still watching every flickering nuance of her pose. His callous stare tried to pierce the spinning blades. . . tension welled up in her as she realized that she was being tested.

For a moment she wished that she had gone with Francis.

The inspector stared at her, his eyes gleaming wetly like fruit asking to be picked.

She tried to think of the snowstorm but saw only its shadow.

The tension uncoiled and flew out along her arms.

She snapped out of posture and reached for the inspector's face.

#### *Afterimage:*

The manager of HIP Store 34 conversed with the coroner as he led him through the stockrooms to the door marked *Prop Storage*.

"I suppose we should have known. Even after the computer categorized her brainwaves as characteristic of psychosis we couldn't be sure it was the sort of, uh, derangement that would interfere with her work here. Sometimes that sort of, uh, excessive

zeal is very helpful to the career of a humanequin. So we sent the inspector to examine her for—well, for the possibilities of *violence*. He was about to question her when it happened. . . but this extraordinary physical reaction—"

"Well. . . aren't there cases of people changing their bodies psychosomatically? I mean, like those nuns who made their palms bleed with stigmata and women who make themselves look nine months pregnant just by believing in it? Couldn't it be that?" suggested the coroner.

"Maybe. But the room has been heated to ninety degrees and she still hasn't melted. And if she hypnotized herself into making her skin like that it should go away after she's dead. *If she's dead.*"

"But of course she's dead," the coroner said quickly. But he swallowed apprehensively as the storemanager opened the door for him.

Inside were a number of actual dummies, plastic mannequins left over from before the Mandatory Employment act. All were covered with dust but one. It wasn't plastic. It was a woman, frozen iced solid and gleaming white; coated with a thin layer of fine snow. The woman was frozen into a typical humanequin pose. . .

. . . Except that she clutched the humanequin inspector's eyes, one in each icy white fist.

—JOHN SHIRLEY

*Elinor Busby is F. M. Busby's wife, a long-time science fiction fan, and a budding author in her own right. This is her first story. It is almost certainly not going to be her last.*

# TIME TO KILL

ELINOR BUSBY

**S**HE HAD TO escape the crowd. Picking up her skirts Heidi ran through dusty streets. Her sandals fell off and stones hurt her feet, but dodging around corners she managed to elude them and get to the time machine and shut the door, flip the levers and shimmer away to where she belonged.

The crowd hated her. They had a right to hate her; she had committed a murder, a willful, premeditated murder of a person who had done no wrong. But that wasn't the reason they hated her. They had not discovered the body she had left crumpled in a dark corner behind the temple.

The crowd hated her because—"Witch! Witch!"—she heard their cries.

She was wrong. Noticeably wrong. She had done so much research, tried hard to be authentic, had even learned to weave so that her clothes would be right. It hadn't worked. Even her Hebrew, so painstakingly learned, was too formal and incorrectly pronounced. Worst of all were her attitudes. She didn't know how to hold her body or even how to look at people properly.

It was a miracle they had let her exist in their time long enough to accomplish her mission. She wished they hadn't. "No, no," she thought. "I did the right thing. I *have* to have

done the right thing."

She was surprised that she was still alive. It was a suicide mission, changing the past to alter the future, and she a part of that future, of the smog, population pressure, resource depletion and sense of impending doom. She had forced the Changeover; why was she still alive to remember what she had rather not?

**"L**YLE," said Heidi, "what part of the past do you think they intend to change?"

"It's a Top Secret project. Are you sure we're private enough?"

They were sitting in a park, no one very near.

"What's to bug? A blade of grass?"

"There are always lip readers—more every year with noise pollution increasing. If we hold our heads quite close together and look directly at each other, it should be all right?"

"Kiss, kiss," said Heidi, drily. They both grinned. They were friends, not lovers.

"The idea, of course, is to change the past to improve the present. If it's successful many of us will never have been born."

"Lyle, why do you like to tell me what I already know?"

"I like to, that's all. Do you really mind?"

She laughed. "It wouldn't do me

much good. Where do you think they will put Changeover?"

"As close to present as they can and still have it do any good at all. They want to eliminate as few people as possible, just enough to give the survivors a chance, a viable planet."

"That's dumb! They should put Changeover far enough back to make it a really nice world."

"I agree—but you and I are low on the totem pole. They won't ask our advice. Dr. Halvorson wants Changeover about twenty years ago, just after the end of the Vietnam war. He says that's a good time because a lot of people were concerned about ecology, and would accept a better automobile engine, less polluting, not run on gasoline, and so forth."

"Hah! Detroit had less than no desire to retool and had a stranglehold on Congress."

"Well—that's what Dr. Yamagata says, too. His idea is that Changeover should be run back to before World War I. He wants Henry Ford gently hinted into developing some better type of vehicle."

"Him? He was as independent as a hog on ice. I *think* I see him taking a hint from a Time Traveller."

"Where would *you* put it, Heidi?"

"I'd like something really drastic. I wish we could go back to ancient Greek and Roman times, and Vikings and Druids, when people worshipped goddesses and gods, trees and fountains. People were close to the Mother Earth, a part of Mother Nature. The world went wrong when we lost the Female Principle—choked out by God the Father and God the Son."

"Blaming everything on us fellows, are you?" said Lyle, grinning. "Not that I can claim to be either God the Father or God the Son."

"But I think maybe you're right."

**H**EIDI AND LYLE talked many times after that, and became increasingly convinced that elimination of Christianity would save the world.

"It was St. Paul," said Lyle. "Christ himself did no real harm. St. Paul invented all that 'better to marry than to burn' stuff. He transferred the puritanical aspects of Judaism into Christianity, when Jesus had been happy to associate with publicans and whores, and had said 'let he among you who is without sin cast the first stone.'"

"And it was St. Paul who brought Christianity out of Palestine into Rome. To save the world from Christianity, all we have to do is eliminate Paul."

"I don't agree," said Heidi. "I think you're right that St. Paul was responsible for the anti-life interpretation of Christ's teachings, but if it hadn't been he, perhaps it would have been someone else. The only way to be sure is to kill Jesus."

"I always *liked* Jesus," said Lyle.

"Well, yes," said Heidi. "But killing him is the only way to be sure of preventing Christianity."

"Then *you* do it," said Lyle.

Heidi laughed. "Lyle, no way would anyone expect you to do something as decisive as killing."

Heidi, with Lyle's help, made her plans and preparations. The machine was completed, and while the factions of Dr. Halvorson and Dr. Yamagata were still arguing about Changeover times and methods, Heidi and Lyle moved.

Heidi, with Lyle standing guard, slipped into the time machine and set the controls, both geographic and chronologic. She was at the temple when Jesus, twelve years old, arrived

question the rabbis. She had thought that would be the easiest one—smart ass kid—making his elders look stupid.

It was not an easy time. A young boy, radiant in early puberty, with brilliant dark eyes that seemed to look through her, examine her darkest secrets and accept them all.

She talked to him just long enough to establish his identity. She knew he was God and she loved him with all her heart. Then she stuck the knife to his chest.

HE WAS BACK. Lyle was still there, standing guard. Of course. She had

returned at essentially the same time she left.

"Did you really go back? Are you sure the controls were set right?"

She nodded. The doors to the laboratory were being battered. The energy drain had been noted. In their last moments of freedom, Heidi and Lyle ran to the window and looked out. Too many people, too much smog. No changes of any kind were evident.

"You blew it," said Lyle. "Your Female Principle is as suppressed as ever. You didn't do a thing to stop Mithraism."

—ELINOR BUSBY

3

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ar From Eve (cont. from page 29)

aking into her.

I will wait now, she thought of him. I will wait for you.

And then the side of the transparent tank was closed, and the atmosphere changed subtly and slowly. Her eyes slid shut and the rise and fall of her breasts became regular and steady and ever-slower. Alen remained by her until the technicians moved the tank into the central cryogenic chamber.

From an observation terrace, Alen watched as, minutes later, they entered the enormous chamber. It was like an endless hall of tiny rectangular mirrors lying on the long desks, but if one looked beyond the

shining glass, one could see the shadowy, insubstantial shapes beyond. How long had some of them lain in suspension? There was no way of knowing when cures to their esoteric illnesses would be perfected. No way of knowing for any of them, except Miria, thought Alen. Her deliverance would come from the stars.

**T**HE THREE DAYS of briefing passed quickly. The City hardly noticed when the shuttle lifted-off the Lake. While Alen rode atop the flickering pencil of light and heat, a woman lay beneath the City in the darkness of coldsleep, a smile upon her face.

—THOMAS F. MONTELEONE

hard bench; Vana leaned over to Aaron. "You know, I've got the feeling that women run things here," she said *sotto voce*, intentionally comic.

"Yes," concurred Aaron. "Some sort of matriarchy."

"I see it, but it's impossible," she stated flatly, looking him in the eye. "I'm no anthropologist, but I know from things I've read that matriarchies just don't develop in normal human socialization. On paper it's a superior brand of society. But that's just theory based on feminine characteristic studies. Females are the cement that holds any society together. But men just *don't* let the women have comparable rights. My God, it took *millenia* for women to have equal rights and opportunities with men on Earth. Here we have a separate society—almost medieval—and the females seem to run things. It's just not natural—it's a set-up."

Aaron nodded. She was voicing his rapidly solidifying suspicions. A set-up. Yes. The monorail track, the vehicle. The spaceport. His fears were solidifying as well, becoming all too well founded. "We'll talk about it later. Right now, you're going to have to be our spokesperson, Vana. It's obvious that they'll assume you to be our rightful leader. God knows . . ." He smiled. "Perhaps they think we're some sort of male harem."

"Go on." She nudged him gently, eyes atwinkle. A little surge of something resembling affection coursed through him.

A tempest of voices stormed over their soft conversation. Aaron turned his attention to the Council. Hildegard emerged from the chamber door into which she had earlier disappeared. She raised a hand for silence among the Council members.

"Lord Councilor Adelaide of the

Clan Robertson," she proclaimed loudly. "Take your places for her arrival, please."

There was a rustle of robes as standing women sat down around long, polished rectangular tables. Shoes and chair-legs scuffed into place. Then there was solemn silence.

The woman who entered was tall and slim, age hovering somewhere in the forties. She moved with a confident grace born of years of leadership. Her robe was a paler brown edged in white. Her hair, piled atop her head, was slate-gray at the temples. Her manner had a regal aspect to it. Her face was fine, almost aristocratically featured.

She stepped up to the end of the table, leaned upon it, and addressed the assembled members. "Morning Council. It appears the subject of our session previously scheduled will have to be postponed. Sister Hildegard brings before us a matter of some delicacy."

Even at this distance, Aaron could see the wisdom in her manner; the emphasis on certain words, the very way in which she held herself.

She paused, angled her eyes to the young woman at her right. "Elizabeth. Please seat the woman in the Hearing chair. The other ladies please find seats for them slightly behind their woman."

"Yes, Councilor," replied the woman. She rose gracefully, moved toward them.

Aaron caught his breath.

Those eyes, that hair, that face. That sleek, confident walk, evocative of the personality chords Aaron knew so well.

She looked amazingly like Julie.

### III

*It dangled like a sparkling Christmas*



tree ornament, pendant on silvery alloy-strong wires from one of the spokes radiating from and revolving around the peak of the General Positioning Building: their dining bulb. The private sky car wafted them in a circle over New Los Angeles, a kilometer from the pavement below, as they quietly carved up Chinese pheasant, flavoring it with frequent sips of tart Rhine wine.

"I'm not going to renew next month," Julie announced, breaking the silence and the tension. She tapped a spoon absently against her glass, staring out the clear plastex to a Pacific Ocean paved with a glittery-white road of light out to the rising moon. But her eyes were unfocused, taking in none of the beauty.

No, he thought. No.

He felt a tide of pain rise in his chest. The breathtaking view the Carousel Restaurant car provided, the flashing lights outlining the city below—all this splendor could as well have been a sea of sludge.

But he had his pride.

"I've expected as much." He sighed and pushed away his plate, fit a dope-stick to his lips, lit it. He didn't offer her one. "This year hasn't been all fun and games. But I'd thought perhaps you'd hazard another . . ."

"Just to be sure?" Her eyes flashed fiercely, fixing on him. "To be positive this life of ours isn't a total botch?" Her delicately feathered blonde hair swished quietly as she shook her head. "And waste another year?"

This year had been a waste to her? Well, that could be a great lead-in to an argument of the razzle-dazzle variety that had so often sparked between them in the past months. But he felt a deep emptiness inside; he didn't care to fill it with bitterness.

"You could stay a few more months,

without the contract." He looked at her and could not stop his eyes from saying, please.

"Not just you." Her tone was fuzzy. She was probably on powder. She usually was. "Whole damn city. Whole damn life. I'm sick. Want change."

"There's always the neuro-psych . . ." he offered.

"Down at the brain-fry you call work?" She peeled back glossy lips over pearl teeth with a sneering smile. "I might as well zip-top my skull, plop the contents into a blender, and punch the puree button."

He drew on his cigarette, held the smoke in, getting high. He let it stream out through his nostrils. He couldn't let her go without a struggle. For all her craziness, she was the only woman who fit, dammit! Even if she was the glycerin to his nitro.

"Listen," he said, making his voice go into a monotone to hide the naked plea. "We can do it, Julie. Just give it a little more time. We haven't climatized to one another yet." He attempted to smile, but failed.

She leaned over toward him. "When I go, you'll never see me again. I don't want to be cruel, but that's the way it has to be for me. It's just not working out." Her eyes softened, caring. "You could have a selective mem-wipe and forget me, if it hurts."

He swallowed, and his pride evaporated. "Never. You don't understand, Julie. I love you."

"So do I," she said with a tone of sarcastic self-deprecation. "That's why I've got to go, Aaron."

The stars glittered like ice crystals. He could see other couples in other sky-bulbs, laughing, enjoying each other. He sucked on his dope-stick hungrily as they sighed slowly through the winds toward the out-

"HEY, AARON." Elton's deep voice bashed through his reverie. "C'mon. They want us to sit in those chairs behind Vana."

"Uh, right." He stood unsteadily, made the few steps successfully, plopped down beside Elton and Chaimon. Elton leaned over to him, whispered. "They're really making quite a fuss."

Aaron nodded. The woman whom Councilor Adelaide had asked to prepare seating was back in her place. He realized that he'd frankly stared at her all the time she'd set up the chairs and shown them to their places. She looked so much like Julie—the faintly upturned nose, that tiny perfect chin. . . .

But of course she wasn't Julie. There were small things about her that were not at all like Julie. Her cheeks were not as round, her ears were a trifle smaller than his remembered image of his former wife.

She'd gone, of course. Just like she'd said she would. Had exited his life as quickly as she'd entered. As far as time went, she was only a bit-player in his life. Then why did he cling so tenaciously to her memory?

With a concerted effort, he pushed it all out of his head, and listened to the questions that the councilor was piling up on Vana.

The entire Council seemed to be speaking at once. Councilor Adelaide raised a hand, which stilled them. "Now then—Vana, is it?"

"Yes," answered Vana politely.

"Vana." The older woman picked up a pencil, toyed with it. "I don't think you realize the implications of this hoax you are attempting to perpetrate."

"It's no hoax, Councilor. Why

should anyone care to fool you so? We are from *beyond* your community, and we only seek rest and shelter and help in our journey. Is this too much to ask of such an obviously benevolent society?"

"Recently we have been catching scents of not-so-benevolent activities within our midst. I would like to make certain that your group is not associated with them." She paused thoughtfully, then continued. "Tell me—if you are not of this town, where do you claim to come from?" (Aaron marked how sceptical, almost sarcastic; her tone was.)

"We come from the home planet of humankind," stated Vana, causing a stir amongst the women.

Councilor Adelaide slapped the table-top for silence.

"This is the home of humans," she declared simply. "You deny that?" There was the hint of intimidating menace in her voice.

Vana's response was firm: "With all respect to your beliefs, yes—I do."

"What is the name of this 'planet'? And how is it that if it is the home of humans; we are here—and not there?"

"The Homeworld has been sending ships out to the stars, filled with men—I mean *people*—to populate the habitable worlds of the galaxy. I assume that this is one of the colonies that was established. What sort, I don't know. As for your question, the Homeworld's name is Earth."

Laughter rippled. Councilor Adelaide spoke, smiling in a condescending manner. "Dear woman—*this* is Earth. And talk of other worlds is—is—well, *nonsense*. And heretical. Do you not espouse yourself to the teachings of the Holy Order of the Sacred Family?"

"No. I'm afraid I don't even know

what that religion is."

The Councilor frowned sternly. "It oes against all I believe, all that experience has taught us through the ges, but it seems as though you re . . ." She trailed off, as though angling through her vocabulary for her proper word. *Strangers*, thought Aaron. That's what she was after. But t seemed as though there was no uch word in Morningtown language. . . . *others*." She cleared her throat.

It is heartening to see you have our ways, and our language—to a certain xtent. Perhaps you are decendants of eople who departed from this community years ago . . . although there ; no record of such a departure."

"No, I'm sorry, but that's just *not* the case," insisted Vana. "As a matter f fact, I'm hardly the leader of this roup. If it *has* a leader, I suppose hat would be Elton." She glanced ack, pointed at the large man erched at the edge of his seat.

That raised the loudest tumult yet. The Councilor stood. The noise died own. "You mean, a *man* commands ou?" she demanded.

"Well, not *exactly*. And it's not a matter of superiority. He just seemed o want that job; I didn't."

"We are *outraged*, Sister Vana." Councilor Adelaide spoke in sombre ones. "Are you not aware of what occurs when *men* are in charge? There much in our great *Book of Ages* ast dealing with the subject. Are you o unenlightened as to be unfamiliar ith human nature?"

"Listen," Vana shot back angrily. [ve told you I . . . we are not of this ociety. You seem to think that you're e only humans in this universe. Well, let me tell you, you're *not*! So et that through your thick skulls! Ve've come in peace, we want to ave in peace. But we need help.

We don't know where the hell we are, why *you're* here, or what! And as to your allegation that I'm under a man's thumb—well, that's ridiculous!"

Excited cries of "Impudence!" and "Outrage!" rose from the group.

Elton stood protectively, but Aaron urged him down again. There was no sense making this worse. If anyone stirred up a hornet's nest in this situation, it should be Vana. Besides, they *had* to get as much information as possible.

The rucus finally died. Councilor Adelaide leaned forward emphatically. "Sister Hildegarde has related to me the story of your arrival. Your *unusual* costumes have been mentioned. I have no choice for the moment but to act as though I believed you—despite my mind, which rebels at the very notion." A light smile touched her lips. "We are not a hostile people as certain of our male-dominated ancestors were. I hope you understand, Sister Vana, that the outcries you have heard stem from simple astonishment at your claims. I think I am speaking for all assembled when I say that these claims have been most disconcerting. It is impossible to accept them. You ask for hospitality—we will extend that gladly. Food, rest—it's yours. We will show you our life here, if you wish to see it. We will answer your questions as best we can." She straightened. "But in turn, for the welfare of the community, we must ask you *not* to mingle openly with our folk with your disturbing tales. This is a settled, content world in the main. We strive toward Harmony. We have very few troubling ideas to concern us. Our main chore is the maintenance of equilibrium in our relations, and the richness of life for each individual. That, I think, would be troubled if news of you, ah,

others was go abroad. It is against the tenets of our beliefs that others *exist* outside our community. To harm those beliefs would harm the fabric of life here.

"I'm sure I trust all of you here of the Council to remain silent for the sake of our quality of life in Morningtown?"

There were general replies of assent.

"Excellent. I can see no further reason for this inquiry," she stated. "The sooner we shove the subject from our minds, the sooner we will forget it."

My God, thought Aaron. She's not going to ask us anymore questions. Hasn't the woman *any* curiosity?

"You and these men will be provided food and shelter for three days. Afterwards, you will depart—if indeed, you actually intend to depart, for I still suspect you are tricksters. I must warn you, inquiries will be made among the clans, discreetly, as to the possibility of your being of our number all along. In the meantime, you will be accompanied by my trusted aide, Elizabeth, who will see that you are accommodated, that your questions are answered, and that you stay out of trouble. Any problems at all, and we shall be forced to—become unpleasant. Is this not reasonable, Sister Vana?"

"I've no complaints. Thank you very much. But haven't you any more questions? Don't you wonder now about the truth of these beliefs you've had about your past? There are many things I could tell you, just about this town!"

"No!" answered the woman sharply. "We are content. I hope I shall not see you again. Good day." She briskly and abruptly left the room.

ELIZABETH herded them efficiently from the Council room.

"Where are you taking us?" asked Vana, becoming accustomed to her role as spokesperson for the group.

"I presume you are hungry," replied Elizabeth. "The Inn where we will find rooms for you has an acceptable kitchen, I believe."

"Hungry?" said Elton. "I'm famished!"

"Likewise," echoed Chaimon, absorbed in the homey sights the town streets had to offer, seeing them now with the veil of timidity lifted from his eyes. Aaron noticed that the fellow now seemed not merely to accept their situation, but to be quite enjoying it.

They took a short walk through the streets, crossed a tree-shaded park sprinkled with bright-colored flowers, and, for a centerpiece, a pond stocked with fish, waterlilies and ducks.

"Quite a nice town," remarked Aaron, drawing up to Elizabeth's side, feeling awkward. How should he approach the woman. Truth to tell, he had been paying more attention to her than to the pleasant, fresh-scented surroundings. The more he watched her, the more he realized the limits of his comparison of her to Julie. But the differences were all to the good. She seemed—well, better *suit*ed to her surroundings than Julie. She seemed to fit. She belonged here.

Of course, he was stirred not merely by his natural attraction to her; she was at present the most accessible source of information about this place. If she was willing to speak freely. He didn't see why she shouldn't be—Councilor Adelaide had said that any questions would be answered.

Elizabeth looked at him without expression.

"I hope you don't mind me speaking with you," he said.

"Of course not," she returned mildly. "Why should I?"

"Men seem to occupy a second-class status herabouts. I thought my speaking to you might seem impertinent."

There was a hint of a smile in her aspect. "You *don't* know anything of our ways, do you? We do not regard males as second class citizens. They are a valuable part of our community, and in most cases treated with respect and equality. In some facets of life they are quite vital. But in leadership?—no. That is taboo. However, there is no law against intermingling." She smiled disarmingly. "That would be foolish."

They stopped before a rustic, straw-thatched two-storied inn, hung with a sign marked 'The Angel's Wing' in flowing, curlicued lettering.

"This is the place. It's run by the Edwards clan," Elizabeth said. "The Minister of Housing is an Edwards—hence we are using this inn to accommodate you."

"It's quite—beautiful," said Chaimon. The others readily agreed. Elizabeth gestured them to follow her inside. The first floor was a comfortable conglomeration of tables and booths under a low-slung ceiling. A bartender dispensed foaming mugs of some sort of brew—alcoholic, no doubt, thought Aaron—to the sparse crowd of men and women.

Elizabeth pointed them toward a booth. "Have a seat. I'll just skip over and make arrangements with the landlord."

Elton was eyeing the casks of liquor with a look of delight. "Uh—I don't suppose you could get me a draft, could you? Haven't had a good nip in a long time." They settled in a booth

which was barely big enough for the four of them.

"Certainly," Elizabeth responded. "But realize that the house limit is two mugs here."

"Limit!" cried Elton. "In a bar?"

"Of course," said Elizabeth. "It's a rule of the government here. We want no overindulgence. No alcoholics. It breeds unhappiness and violence." With that she turned and headed toward the bartender.

"Well, how about that!" blustered Elton. "Two servings is hardly enough to wet the old whistle. Always thought women were a bit fascist!"

"Not a bad idea," chirped Vana. "Not a bad idea at all. I must say that so far I rather like the way they run things here."

"You *would*," grumbled Elton.

"All right, Elton," Vana said, her voice getting serious. "You admit that this is a fairly primitive, non-technological society, in many respects physically resembling those of middle-Europe of the last millenium. But there is a difference, you know. Where is the sickness, the diseases, the poverty? Where are the physical signs of callousness and inhumanity that scarred those other societies? I could go on and on. It looks to me like we've got a working utopia here, and if that means that the average citizen is limited to two beers a day, well, it seems to me that it's worth it."

"She's got you there, Elton," said Chaimon. "I'm really getting to like this town. It's got an incredible atmosphere—I feel as though I *belong* here, so far. I do like it."

"Utopia? Bah!" huffed Elton. "We've not had a proper look at it, yet, and you're blathering about utopia. After I get my stomach stuffed with something, I want to find out

what is going on here. This is no natural society."

"No," concurred Aaron. "And there's something else unnatural about this community—besides the obvious. It's all right here in this valley. They've obviously been here quite some time—and there's been no *expansion*. As members of Earth's colonization program, I need not tell you that the urge to move out, to *grow* is a natural human quality. These people don't seem to have that desire—at all."

Elton nodded vigorously. "And they don't seem to have an inkling of that monorail track running beneath them—or of the people that must visit them in the monorail vehicles. The question is, why are these people here? Who really maintains this society? We've got a very valuable clue—the reaction to our foreign clothes."

"No offence," said Vana, lounging back with a calculating look in her eye. "But I really don't think our hosts will exactly open up to your brand of brusque inquiry. Nor do I think we'll get much from our attractive keeper over there as a group, bombing her with questions." She nodded her head sagely as she stared at Aaron in contemplation. "She seems to have taken a fancy to you, Doc," she said, a wry twist to her smile.

Aaron was taken aback. "But what . . . how . . . ?"

"Oh, you can't see now, but I noticed her reactions to you as you talked to her on the way over. Trust me. I know these things."

"So what do you want him to do—seduce her, thus prying the secrets of this world from her lips with love?" Elton asked sarcastically.

"Nothing so vile," responded Vana.

"I'm merely pointing out that she seems to like Aaron. And Aaron, with his psychological background, has a skill with extracting information unobtrusively. I suggest that we plead this table too small for all of us, and maneuver Aaron to a separate table, alone with Elizabeth. What do you say, Shrink?"

Aaron didn't complain.

#### IV

HIS STOMACH well-filled with black bean soup, steak, carrots and beer, his mind well-filled with new information about Morningtown, Aaron leaned back in his chair and met Elizabeth's gaze over the burning candle set in the midst of the meal's ruins.

She had quickly settled the matter of the rooms and their meals, and had ordered up a splendid repast for them all. When she returned with the beer, the party, under the guidance of Vana, had finagled her over to another table with Aaron easily; she seemed to welcome the chance to talk with him alone.

And talk they did. Aaron had delved deep with his seemingly innocent but probing questions.

"Was the meal satisfactory?" inquired Elizabeth. She drained the dregs of her brew, watching him with interested eyes over the glass rim.

Aaron was awash in a mellow mood. The two foamy glasses of beer he had consumed tuned down the harshness of reality, coated his nerves in soft relaxation. The atmosphere was tinged with the aroma of sweet pipe tobacco, savory scents from the kitchen, and the odor of beer-stained wood. He relished the rural tavern quality about it. "Indeed. Very delicious," he responded, quite truthfully. "Haven't had a meal like this in a

long time, and the past few days have been especially trying in the food department."

"Your companions still seem to be enjoying themselves," she commented. The soft sheen of her hair rippled as she gestured with her head toward the others, who appeared to be in the midst of a heated discussion as they tossed down large bits of second helpings, liberally diluted with beer. "The big one seemed especially pleased that I arranged an extra mug for him."

"That's Elton for you." He fingered a fork, staring down at the utensil contemplatively. "I was quite impressed by your Councilor Adelaide. How did you manage to find yourself her special favorite, trusted enough to be charged with a group of potentially dangerous . . . outsiders?" He looked at her on the last word, lending it added emphasis.

She laughed musically. "So finally the discussion settles on me. Well . . . It's nice to be noticed. I've felt a little jealous of our community, competing for your attention. . . ."

Aaron licked the corner of his lips, chuckled. "I didn't realize such attention was desired."

She fixed him searchingly with her gray-green eyes. "Now that I've talked with you, discovered your ignorance of our world, I am sure that you are indeed . . . what is your word? 'Strangers'? Well, you are strange to me—you are all *strangers* on more levels than one."

"Thanks. I'm glad you believe us."

"I have given you more information about our world than I thought I would. But that's neither here nor there."

A lot of information. Yes, thought Aaron. Much. He was fairly bursting to spring the results of his questioning

on Vana, Chaimon and Elton; especially the latter who'd be shocked out of his socks.

Damned if it wasn't a sort of utopia—and a pleasant one at that. Marvelously workable, if limited and set in its ways. But something was *wrong* with it on a few levels . . . something missing.

But what? The question nagged at his mind. He ranged briefly over his new information as he chit-chatted with Elizabeth, searching for that something, trying to mull it out.

The society of Morningtown was indeed a matriarchy. Women were in charge of all facets of life. They gave the orders, and the men went along with them, evidently quite satisfied with the admittedly excellent lot that was theirs. Or so Elizabeth claimed. Life and custom was in stasis. Nothing changed much. This, she said, had not always been the case.

According to their religious beliefs, their deities (or deity—it seemed a muddled version of the Christian trinity: a spiritually linked Family godhead with both male *and* female elements; several, and yet at the same time *one*) had created Morningtown as a physical mirror-image of Heaven. And they'd arranged it so that this instant creation of self-perpetuating creatures were equal in governing the affairs of society: both males and females were in charge, according to merit and capacity for leadership. This seemed to be their version of the Garden of Eden—a splendid paradise, worshipful of its Creators. A veritable cornucopia of splendid souls, singing life-hymns to the great concept of Universal Harmony.

However, possessed of free-will, the society had fallen from grace. But this time the men had the fault upon their heads. After a time of great per-



fection, *hubris* grew in their breasts—pride in their gender. Secretly, they envied the women's grace and beauty, and most of all their abilities to create and nurture life within themselves. They desired to dominate the women, to be the sole leaders of society, to create a rule to rival the Heavenly Family in power and majesty. They organized a rebellion. With the combination of their shrewd, evil cunning and their superior physical might, they subjugated the women, made them slaves of their warped male-centric desires for Morningtown. For a time, chaos reigned. Before long, men were struggling amongst themselves. Death and destruction, rape and insanity were rife amongst the people. Women underwent horrible trials in this period.

Disgusted, the Holy Family intervened. They altered the natures of the males slightly, removing the elements that caused them to veer from the Plan. Women became the outright leaders and were told to keep tight reins on men, lest the society become unbalanced again.

However, Morningtown did not go without punishment. After things were set right, the Holy Family withdrew contact from the community, leaving only the *Holy Book of Ages Past* as a record and a guide. Once society reached Perfect Harmony between men and women, between all humans, then the society would be drawn back into the fold that was the constant goal of all: to achieve that perfect quality of social life, of human relations, human love, that would call the Holy Family back into direct contact.

"Then I presume the women preside over religious service," Aaron had said, prodding the conversation

on.

"Yes. Men are certainly in less favor than women in the eyes of the Family. Their salvation is through us."

"Just what are men allowed to do here? I don't see chains on them."

"Chains? As I said, men are certainly not slaves. Ours is a very different system, I think, from what it would be like were the tables turned, men in command."

How right she is, thought Aaron, thinking back to the history of Earth.

"No, we are *quite* realistic. Men are, after all, only men. We try to see that they are kept satisfied with their position in life." She coughed. "You must understand that I find it hard explaining our ways to you. They are simply our ways. No one has really analyzed them, or broken them down into easy words. They just *are*."

But she did attempt to explain. Aaron managed to glean the social structure of Morningtown—no mean feat. As best he could tell from her fragmented descriptions, the population was kept close to a steady six thousand people, of which two thirds were women, one third male. Growth was limited by the Council, which gave assents or rejections to proposed couplings and pregnancies. An unapproved pregnancy would either be terminated by abortion, or its product eliminated by infanticide at birth. The latter method was used in regulating the ratio of males to females. Malformed infants were rapidly disposed of, but were a rarity since it appeared that the Council either had a remarkable system or an intuitive flare for both strengthening and obtaining the best from their gene pool.

Aaron was at first a bit shocked at the seemingly cold-blooded regulation of births, particularly the use of in-

fanticide. And what means, in this relatively primitive society, would women use to abort pregnancies? Perhaps Vana might know. He kept silent on the matter, and continued to encourage the flow of information from Elizabeth.

"How are the members of the Council selected?" he asked.

There were thirty clans that composed the family of Morningtown, Elizabeth told him. Each clan selected a member to be on the governing Council; each Council member held a specific post in the affairs of the community. The Council elected a Lord Counselor from its ranks as a figurehead, a focus for governmental power. During the course of her position in that office, the Councilor had to renounce clan ties for purposes of fairness. Another member of the Councilor's former clan was selected, making the Council a body of thirty-one members.

The clans themselves were the vital segments of the society. Each clan did not limit itself to just one section of the community; the ties were familial rather than territorial. A woman born into a given clan would stay in that clan all her days; that was her family, and the bonds between relatives were strong. A male, however, was not permitted to marry members of his own clan, or maintain sexual relations with them. At the proper age, men married into other clans, relinquishing previous clan names, but tying the clans together with human links. Literally, the community of Morningtown was simply one huge family.

Love matches were the general means of cross-fertilization. A young woman of one clan might meet a single man of another clan, become emotionally involved. The two would request permission to marry. The

Council, with the help of the matriarchs of the involved clans, would study the origins of each and, if their genetic histories were suitable and compatible, there was a transference of the man to the woman's clan.

"But if there is an average of one man for every *two* women, don't half the females get short-changed?" Aaron wanted to know.

No, responded Elizabeth. For marriage was just as much between the man and the clan as it was between the man and the woman. The man was free to engage in sexual relations not merely with his 'wife' but with *any* clan women, barring his own daughters. However, wanderings outside the clans were discouraged, labeled 'adultery', and punished by social ostracism for a time by *all* clans.

But the man's duties in his new clan (whose name he assumed in place of his old clan's name) were not all pleasurable. The clan-men bore the brunt of physical labor in the group—the maintenance of the houses and shops, the cooperative tilling and working of the farmlands outside the town, the hauling and transport of goods. Although they were not discouraged from intellectual pursuits, neither were they encouraged. No special celebrity was placed on a man who could read and write; what good these qualities might accomplish was for the harmonizing of the community.

Indeed, the only reason women learned to read was to study their Holy Book, and to augment the efficient running of day-to-day affairs.

Aaron subtly inquired about such things as art and music, literature and dance.

Oh, these things existed, Elizabeth told him, but no special exaltation was

built around them. They were simple; all their forms contributed principally toward an entertainment value that would achieve the much sought-for Harmony. The *true* Art in this society, the capability most admired and hallowed, was the genius of social relations—the affability between members of one's clan and other clans. The society of Morningtown seemed a complex and beautiful web-work of this, a living exhibition of the women's great art, the inter-relationship of human beings.

To them Love was the most valuable of human qualities. Love in its widest spectrum. From eros-based love of woman for man, through affection for one's family, through friendship with others, to a simple regard for all other members of society. The maintenance of this and its fine-tuning was the chief business of their lives.

Aaron could understand now why the reaction of Councilor Adelaide was simply to shrug off their sudden appearance with their wild tales. By their very natures, Elton, Vana and he would be a disruptive influence on this society.

Now he was wondering if Elizabeth had any curiosity at all about them. It was time to branch out of the simple banter the conversation had devolved into.

"You claim that I interest you," he said, looking at her seriously. "Would you care to hear a little about myself, where I come from, the sort of life I lived there?"

She shrugged. "I am interested in your person—not your background."

"You have no curiosity about my claims? As you can see, I'm very interested in your society. It seems to me that we should make a trade—I should tell *you* about *my* society now."

"If it pleases you. Councilor Adelaide instructed me to see to your needs, and I presume that means to hear out what you say. But I must warn you that I will most likely promptly forget it."

A spark of fury ignited deep in him.

And suddenly, that feeling of anger seemed to cast an illumination on the aspect of these people, this society, that troubled his sense of socio-human symmetry. The thing was, these people lacked *curiosity*—the desire to know what lies beyond the hill. This society was literally locked in by hills, and didn't have the faintest bent for peeping over them! All his fragmented suspicions and intuitions were coalescing into a whole—and the worst of them fit together neatly.

He studied her closely. Was that expression in her eyes a gleam of hidden wonderment? Perhaps. Perhaps not. Nevertheless, he told her his truths.

First, he outlined to her the situation on Earth—the *actual* Earth. How it was a crowded planet, how it conquered the stars with the discovery of travel through Macro-Space, and had seeded the stars with humankind. He explained all this in as simple a vocabulary as he could devise.

He explained to her how he and his companions had volunteered for the space-colonization program that had been ongoing for centuries, and was now populating the most distant reaches of the galaxy. How their ship must have had a malfunction, how their modular liship had brought them to this planet.

He looked at her firmly. "I doubt if you're going to believe this, Elizabeth, but there's no question in my mind that your ancestors are from Earth as well. This society was created not by some 'Holy Family'—

but by humans. Humans who must control this planet. As to *why* they've set up this society with no self-awareness of its true origins, I've only strong suspicions." He leaned forward, spoke emphatically: "Elizabeth, I know they come here. There's an underground tunnel that travels beneath this very city . . ."

"Yes, of course there is," she said, puzzled. "I can show it to you, if you'd like to see it."

"**G**OOD GOD!" Elton plumped down on the soft feather bed heavily, his face a study of disbelief. "She knows there's a tunnel underneath this city? She's *seen* the monorail car?" His beefy face was flushed a light pink with the beer he'd consumed.

"That's right," responded Aaron as he sank wearily onto the opposite end of the bed, slipping his shoes off. Across a woolen rug, Vana and Chaimon had draped themselves, exhausted, over the other double bed. They merely stirred slightly at the news. "When she takes me around tomorrow—showing me the sights as it were—she intends to take me down to it."

Several hours had passed fleetingly in the room below. The others had eventually joined Aaron and Elizabeth; the talk had been free and convivial. Finally, Elizabeth had pleaded the necessity of attending to clan-home duties. She showed them to their room, a spacious, airy chamber immediately above the public room, tastefully decked with cream curtains and antique-looking furniture. She suggested they get some rest. She would return to breakfast with them an hour after sun-up, at which time they would decide exactly

how their time in Morningtown should be spent.

Now dusk was settling over the town. The fatigue Aaron had accumulated over the past days was heavy in him. All he could consider was how nice it would be to let it all seep out into the so soft bed he sat upon.

But Elton . . . Elton was flustered; Elton wanted to talk. "How do they explain it away? I mean, it doesn't make sense!"

"They've lived with it all this time," explained Aaron through a yawn. "You grow up with something, and no matter how unnatural it might seem to others, it's natural to you. They claim the tunnel is an artifact of the ages when things were right between their deities and their ancestors. The car, which they always see as being empty, by the way, is a physical reminder of the spiritual existence of their Gods. One day, it's said, when Harmony is attained, that car will bring physical representatives of the Godhead to welcome the community of Morningtown back into the fold."

"I don't understand," said Elton. "Sounds like you know a little more about this place than we do. You got lots of info from Elizabeth, eh?" He slanted over intently toward Aaron, impatient for a reply.

"Oh, come on," objected Chaimon. "Can't all that wait until tomorrow? I'm tired."

"No," sighed Aaron. "I'd better let you in on it. Hope you can sleep after I tell you what I think the situation is, here."

Briefly, he related his understanding of what Elizabeth had told him. When he finished, some minutes later, they were all wide-awake.

"What's your opinion, Aaron?" Vana wanted to know.

Pausing, Aaron considered whether

he should totally unveil his thoughts on the matter. It would upset them—but then, they'd probably come to the same conclusion after a while, anyway. A conclusion which he would have to affirm. It was the *only* rational explanation of their surroundings, and Aaron did not care to venture into irrational explanations.

"All right. I'll tell you what I think." He paused, steeped his fingers, and considered his phrasing. "Back on Earth, as a psychologist working on behavioral studies, I heard rumors—wild rumors, I thought then—from certain associates in the socio-behavior departments. Something about a league of social scientists, some centuries ago, totally dissatisfied with the methods used for obtaining solid, proven facts about human societies: how they work, what exactly are the best social philosophies and *why*—like that. They advanced the argument that sociology and anthropology and social psychology could be changed from very vague, soft sciences to hard, disciplined sciences with definite laws. And in the process, mankind could gradually achieve the perfect political and social systems in which to live. But the only way that the hard facts could be obtained toward such a state of enlightenment would be to carry out controlled social experiments—which of course is a highly difficult thing to achieve. It's one thing to mix a few chemicals together and see what their reaction is. It's a pretty different matter to mix humans with obscure social systems to determine the results.

"Now these beliefs flourished in the 21st century, and well into the 22nd. This, of course, was the age in which Macro-Space was discovered and the Sleep of the Long Moment was per-

fectured. The combination of the two made colonization of the stars possible and practical. At this time there was a group of scientists, powerful politicians and wealthy men, who were crying out for these social experiments to be effected for the sake of the maturation of human society, so that the colonies of Earth could develop viable political and social systems.

"And then, suddenly, there was no more talk of such experiments. People seemed too busy questing out into the reaches of the Galaxy. Or so it seemed.

"Now the rumors I heard from my associates in socio-psych were to the effect that the *real* reason for this die-down was that such experiments *had* been set in motion—that various individuals scheduled to colonize a given planet were simply hijacked, mem-wiped, re-programmed, and employed in isolated, controlled social experiments on some secluded, forbidden world, well away from normal space-traffic."

"Why—why," sputtered Elton. "That's an *outrage*! To take away memory is to take away the fundamental cohesion of a personality! It's tantamount to murder! It's immoral!"

"Which would be why such a world—or worlds—would be kept secret. The public outcry would be incredible. Colonists would not trust the para-government which now oversees colonization programs. That's why such worlds would be *forbidden* to normal space-farers." He turned to Vana. "It was you, Vana, who termed this community a 'set-up'. It was you who noted that matriarchy was not a natural social path basically primitive societies take. And these people are obviously derived from Earth stock. They speak a form of Galactic English which is easy to understand . . ."

"You think that this is a 'Forbidden World'," whispered Vana sombrely. "That this community is a social experiment? That the monorail, the underground tunnel are means of gaining access to this place—"

"To monitor the situation . . . to record data . . . to take readings from social-measurement devices embedded in walls—God knows what they actually *do* when they come here. But we know that the people can't see them . . ."

"Subliminal hypnosis, keyed by some factor . . ." muttered Chaimon.

"Their clothes! That's it!" blurted Elton. "That's why that peasant had a fit. That's why Marthe saw us flicker! Our khakis must be quite similar to the uniforms worn by . . ."

"Overseers . . . Overlords," continued Aaron. "But whatever we call them, they exist, and we're going to have a problem with them."

"Are they necessarily *bad* people?" questioned Vana, with a concerned frown. "I mean, if we just waited until one showed up here, we could request transportation to the spaceport and we'd be okay."

"Possibly," said Aaron. "But *this* is the frightening part. As I mentioned, the general universe does not know of this world, of the things that are going on here and, most importantly, the *results* of social experiments, which will change, perhaps are already changing, the fabric of human societies throughout the universe when gradually implemented. This project has no doubt cost the owners quite a bit over the decades, centuries even. No—I doubt if they are willing to let us—a party of four colonists—who've blundered onto their secrets—out into the general run of galactic society with our new, potentially explosive knowledge. No—I

doubt if they'd let us off this planet at all."

"But if we promised—" said Vana.

"Promised?" blared Elton. "You think they'd believe us?" He turned his gaze to Aaron. "But you're getting at something, man. And I think I know what it is. If they catch us, they'll mem-wipe us *too*, won't they? Place us in one of their experiments? They might have quite a few on this planet." He stood, glowering. "But let 'em try to get me!" He stooped down to his backpack, dug into it deeply. "Uh-uh. They're not going to mem-wipe *me*!" He pulled out a compact laser gun.

"Where the hell did you get that?" Aaron exclaimed.

"Not exactly a common element of a colonist's luggage, is it?" Elton beamed, quite pleased with himself. "Like I've told you, I'm an electronics engineer by training. I just gave up a certain amount of personal-effects freight in favor of a few electronic, er—components which when unassembled look quite innocent. But when I put them back together . . ." He hefted the weapon in one hand, sighted through the cross hairs at an imaginary target. "I'm just a gunperson. I didn't like to think of myself spacing without some sort of personal protection. It's well I did, right?"

"That could be quite useful," affirmed Aaron. "But I hope you don't have to use it."

"We'll see," stated the big man. "But meanwhile I'm keeping this on me. I'm certainly not going to harm any of the village people."

"Just be careful you don't harm yourself," said Vana.

"No problem. I'm trained to use a laser—and safety is a damned important factor when you're fooling around with one of these babies." He patted

the gun affectionately before slipping it carefully back into his pack. "Okay. I think it's time now to hit the sack. No use wasting our energy worrying. Best thing to do is to get some rest. God knows, I need some. Damned long trek we've made." He gazed about him at the bed situation. "Two to a bed, eh? Who gets to sleep with Vana?" He smiled at her in a rascally manner.

Aaron perceived that the big man was just playing games, but Chaimon seemed to take it seriously. "Well, not *you*. That's for sure!"

"So—are the three of us going to sleep in one bed, leaving Vana with one to herself? C'mon. We're not kids."

Standing up, Chaimon leaned beligerently over the sprawling Elton. "That's *exactly* why I don't want you to bed down with her. You're no kid in any way—except maybe in your intellect."

Aaron raised his hands wearily, despairingly. "Hold it! If we're going to fight over who gets to sleep with Vana—and that's *all* it's going to be, I'm sure—let's not kill each other for it. When in Rome—" He looked over at the woman, and chuckled. "Seems to me since in this community women have a fairly strong voice in matters, we ought to let Vana decide for herself which of you gets to warm her bed. Sound reasonable, Vana?"

Her arms were crossed, and she gazed at Chaimon and Elton as a school teacher might glare at two naughty students. "Well, it would seem that the only choice I have is to select Aaron. After this little fracas, I'm not sure if I trust you two!"

Aaron shrugged. But he congratulated himself inwardly. He was learning how to handle this bunch.

DESPITE the heaviness of his fatigue, despite the calmness, the serenity of the surroundings, Aaron found himself incapable of sleep. He lay scrunched up beneath the blanket, eyes wide open, staring into the room still dimly lit by the warm glow of the burning street lights beyond the windows. He was acutely aware of the textures about him. The cottony cover keeping his and Vana's warmth, the soft pillow he hugged, the quite atmosphere were all gauzily comfortable. Yet the sleep he so desperately wanted, needed, eluded him.

The events of the day danced madly over and over inside his skull, like a video-tape loop constantly re-playing. He pondered them, trying to fill in the vaguer pieces of the overall puzzle.

Meanwhile, oblivious to Aaron's quiet desperation, Elton snored contentedly in the other bed. Damn the man! Elton slept an untroubled sleep which he hardly deserved: It infuriated him to think of Elton's blundering self-assurance. Aaron knew he was a more able human being in most ways than this somewhat obnoxious and supposed 'leader' of the group—but he lacked that one vital faculty that separated those who aspired and those who accomplished: self-confident drive.

Hell, if he'd had a little more ambition, a little more *force* in his being, he wouldn't have crawled away, tail between legs, onto the next star-bound colonization ship after he'd lost Julie. Perhaps if his character had been a trifle more self-assured, a little more powerful, he might not have lost her at all. And then he'd never have known those aimless months of anguish, never experienced the need for a new start, a new direction. And he would not be here on this crazy



planet.

All if only he had what that lummoX Elton had. He was too thoughtful, too brooding; his background in analysis had sucked away his own personality. If he stopped thinking about what he was, and commenced *being* what he was . . .

A faint whisper slipped across the sheet. "Aaron—are you still awake?"

Vana. He rolled onto his back, whispered, "You too?"

She touched his arm. "I'm frightened, Aaron," she confessed.

"You're not the only one."

"No. It's more than that. Not just frightened of what's been happening. I'm frightened of what is happening. In me." Her soft touch on his bare skin turned into a tight grasp.

"What do you mean?" There was a quiet *shush* of covers as he turned to face her.

"I'm not really sure. I've just been lying here, thinking. Suddenly . . . suddenly, I realize how alone I am."

"You've . . . got . . . Elton, Chaimon . . . and me, Vana. You're not alone."

"No. Not that sort of 'alone.' I mean, I'm feeling how *far* away from Earth I am. How insignificant I am against those stars out there . . . against the universe. I feel . . . dreadfully helpless, even with you, my friends, about—here, on this planet. And it scares me." She made a quiet growl of a chuckle in her throat. "Oh, how have the mighty fallen, Aaron. Ah, if you only could have seen me as a child, an adolescent, a young adult enrolling in University, enthusiastic for the vast learning I'd get, the selective engrams stamped into my gray matter. Geez, I was going to rule the world. It all revolved around *me*. And once I got out

into that world and realized that everyone else had as excellent a general education as I did, that I had no special place in society, I decided, 'Well, I'll rule the stars then! This silly situation won't happen to me on a colony'. Always me, me, *me*, Aaron. The competent bitch—without a chance to prove herself." She sighed. "And in the past few days I've come to realize how stupid it all is, how pointless. And it frightens me. Because if *it's* pointless—well, then, I must be pointless too."

He squeezed her hand. "Not so. You have some very *good* points."

"Like *what*?"

"Well—this bed would be awfully cold without you. . . ."

"Oh great. That's just marvelous, Aaron. Here we are in the ultimate feminist society, and you're pulling the standard male tricks on me. You, of all people! Can't you understand?" He could see her smile in the dim light. "I'm having dreadful philosophical doubts. I'm wrestling with my angst. And you won't help."

"I'd much rather wrestle with you."

"Pig," she said mock-angrily. "You're worse than Elton. I wonder what sort of punishment they have here for rebellious men."

"They probably make 'em sleep the night with Hildegard." He touched her cheek. "Look. I've been laying here with my mind in knots too. And what good does it do me? It robs me of rest. Sometimes we have to get our minds off our worries—and I can't think of a better distraction than this—"

He squirmed closer, put his arms around her, nuzzled close. She stiffened, then returned his embrace. He felt her body shake with internal sobs which gradually subsided as she nestled closer in his arms. He felt a las-

situde steal over him, then joined her in slumber.

IT WAS AMAZING how much better he felt in the morning with a hearty breakfast inside him.

"Your friends seemed awfully anxious to foist you off on me," noted Elizabeth as they turned an alley corner onto the main boulevard. Morning business was brisk, yet compared to what Aaron was accustomed to on Earth, leisurely. "Yesterday as well." She was wearing a frock that was slightly more ornamental than the drab apparel she'd worn the previous day. It seemed as though there were constants in any version of human society. The lesson of the peacock. "Are you sure they don't want to go on this tour as well?"

"That's what they say," Aaron assured her. "Evidently, they'd much prefer strolling about on their own—keeping quiet, of course. Just observing. Any questions they have, they'll just wait to ask you when they see you back at the 'Angel's Wing' for lunch."

"Or ask *you*, in privacy. That's why they want you alone with me, isn't it? They think I'll divulge more to an individual person than to the whole group. All the same—I'm putting my *trust* in you, Aaron, that strolling is all they'll be doing this morning."

"Like Vana says, what else can they do? What *harm* can they accomplish? They certainly don't intend to set up soap boxes and preach the masses the truth—I mean, the way *we* see things. We're your guests. We appreciate it, Elizabeth. You have my word. They'll be good."

"Very well. I trust you're right." She halted on the color-brimming boulevard and made an expansive gesture. "So. What do you want to see?

Or would you prefer to 'stroll' as well?"

"It's a beautiful place, this Morningtown," he replied. "Just take me about. Point out various sights. That's all I want. Except of course—"

"Ah," she said, a smile dimpling her cheeks charmingly. "The subterranean chamber. I wondered when you were going to bring that up. You wish to see it."

"Yes. If I may."

"Of course—why not? It's certainly not shut off to anyone. There's not much to see down there. Much more up here . . ."

Aaron cast her a sombre look. "All the same, it's very important to me that I get a look at it."

"Very well. But I hope you're in no rush to get there. It's on the other side of the river."

"No hurry at all. Right now I'd just as soon saunter along with you. Get a feeling for this place . . ."

They walked.

ONCE AGAIN Aaron felt immersed in a past time.

The very breeze that wafted through the Morningtown streets seemed redolent of a contented sort of life. It imbued his steps with bounce. It filled his lungs with life. It cleared his eyes of the figurative grit he'd accumulated from Earth's claustrophobic civilization.

Yes, he thought. Not a bad life. Not a bad life at all.

He was almost able to push that nagging feeling of *wrongness* he had about the place to the back of his mind.

Almost.

Chattering gaily, Elizabeth led him on, winding him through the streets and alleys, through the city's circles, the city's mews, spinning elaborate

explanations for the importance of this building, that blacksmith shop, that group of houses, this cluster of shops, in the over-all fabric of society.

Harmony. The word popped up often.

Instead of actively seeking out information as he'd done the previous afternoon, he merely let his pretty guide flow with her monologue, which he encouraged, urged on with an occasional understanding nod, an appreciative "Really?" or a pointed question.

But he did not forget his principal destination.

"Sun's getting higher, isn't it," he declared. "Time's sliding by fast."

She shot him an amused look. "You want to see your tunnel, don't you?"

"How did you guess?"

"River's just a block away. We'll cross right now. How's that?"

"Fine."

The bridge was an arched, fenced affair—not too long, for the river was not very wide. Small rowboats bobbed in the water. Men and women fished off the bridge and from the riversides. It seemed the nexus point between the fairy-land quality of Morningtown and its reality. Aaron felt an ambivalence tugging him—the dislike of the artificial aspects of this society warring with the gentle lure of its perfection, physical and social. And the beautiful young woman at his side who reminded him so of Julie certainly did not aid his more objective self in his internal battle.

The river crossed, they covered a few more blocks, drifting toward the towering cathedral which was the focus of this side of Morningtown. Not as large as the stone mammoths that had weathered the centuries in United Europe, but it was impressive—not merely in size, but

design. As they neared, Aaron realized that it was a smaller version of the Norman-style cathedrals of Britain—right down to the Norman arched doorways.

Across the street from it was the access door to the tunnel.

"Sort of a minor religious site?" he asked

"Not minor. Or major. There are occasional worship services here. Nothing more. It's a very dreary, very plain place. It's seldom indeed that anyone wants to take a trip down into it."

It was a plain, squat stone building—more a giant *block*, a large *bunker*, thought Aaron, than a building—with a single unembellished door that was markedly plain. Hardly a prepossessing portal into the unknown that lay below.

The door had a knob. Elizabeth twisted this, pushed it inwards, beckoned Aaron to follow her. Without hesitation, he complied.

"Down these steps," directed Elizabeth.

There was a large opening in the floor of the otherwise bare room from which light thrust up.

Not candle-light. Not lantern-light, nor fire-light.

Electric light.

The steps were hard metal. The handrail was some sort of plastoid. They moved down the first set of steps, to a landing. They continued down another set of stairs, the sounds of their feet upon the steps echoing around them like a phantom army. Five flights in all they travelled until they reached the bottom.

"Well, here it is," said Elizabeth. "I like to come down here every once in a while, when I have doubts about the Holy Family. This is where they'll come again, to be with us. This is my

proof." She stared at him sternly. "Oh—I might add that it's sacrilege to touch any of the walls. Remember that."

But Aaron barely heard her, so caught up was he in his examination of the room and its contents.

Machines.

The 'walls' were the fronts of computer banks and similar mechanisms: consoles. The shiny metal faces bounced back the combined reflections of the large room's overhead strip-lighting and the machines' own inlaid winking lights—red, blue, yellow. There were dials and meters and less familiar devices, clicking, humming, murmuring quietly to themselves.

Aaron felt as though he'd been suddenly yanked back to his job on Earth. These machines were *monitor* computers. Old models, but efficient enough. Monitor computers observed and analyzed the behaviour of living beings in controlled environments. He'd used them before on animals, and for inter-action groups. There were even two-dee TV screens—showing images of activities occurring on the surface. One picture was obviously of the Council Hall interior.

Then he'd been *correct* about this community. It was all a social experiment.

Three of the walls were so covered with equipment. The fourth held a wide indentation in the ground, with a silvery metal rail in its middle.

It also held a monorail car.

A simple-enough vehicle, much like the ones on Earth—big, yet streamlined; capable of tremendous speeds.

There were a row of windows, and a door.

That door was open.

"Well, I see that you are suitably impressed," she commented, almost

smugly. She indicated the vehicle "Sometimes that is there, other times it is not. As I mentioned, one day I shall return bearing emissaries from the Holy Family."

He hastened to her, gripped her arms, looked at her hard. "Is this all you *really* see down here? Tunnel car, and *bare* walls? And you've never noticed any strangely garbed people?"

"No, certainly not!" she replied "And I *see* only what there is to see. Why? Do you see something else? And you needn't grip me so tightly," she added softly. "You may hold me if you like—but not so painfully." She was gazing at him with a moist gleam in her eyes, a touch of a smile on her face.

He realized that his breathing had increased with his excitement at the discovery of this place. He tried to steady it.

He let her go, paced over, cautiously thrust his head inside the control compartment of the monorail car. Nothing unusual. The 'standard' controls, seat, storage compartments. But there was no one there.

He moved over to the computers examined these in detail.

Elizabeth joined him tugging at his sleeve. "Hello. Remember me? Why are you staring at blank walls so intently?"

Programmed.

Obviously, the inhabitants of Morningtown had been hypnotically programmed *not* to see these machines. Or their owners.

After his cursory examination of the elements of the computer, he turned back to her. "Listen. We're going to have to go back and find my companions. I want to show them this place. Is that all right?"

She shrugged. "Certainly. That's no problem." She stepped closer. "But

do we have to go back so soon?" she purred, slipping her arms around him. "I mean, the main reason I brought you down here was so we'd have a few minutes of privacy together." She tossed her head back provocatively, smiled. "Even though you obviously suffer under a few delusions, I like you very much, Aaron. Very much indeed."

"Just a moment, Elizabeth. I—" But the flow of his words was hastily dammed by a pair of eagerly working lips. She pressed her body against his knowledgeable, stroked his back with the tips of her fingers in a manner which shot tingles up his spine. He caught a glimpse of fervid, excited eyes. A flash of blond hair swept across his face as she planted kisses across his cheek to his ear.

Her hair was full of a clean, dusky soap-scent.

For a moment he felt irritated, frustrated in his need to understand the mechanics and circumstances of this 'forbidden world'. Of all the times for *this* to happen—!

Then another part of his mind picked up his irritation by the scruff of its neck and pitched it out. His body was already responding to the ellusively familiar feel of the woman who held him. Julie—*not-Julie*—Elizabeth—

Wasn't this what he'd first fantasized when he saw her in that Council chamber? For this moment at least, he could close his eyes to the other problems confronting them. For this moment he could surrender to delicious fantasy: Julie in his arms once more, more eager for him than she'd ever been . . . Julie—*not-Julie*—Elizabeth—

He wasn't being fair to Elizabeth; she knew nothing of her startling resemblance to his former wife. Nor did

he really *need* that resemblance, he realized. . . .

Abruptly, he knew that something was wrong. He felt a hot prickling on the back of his neck. He opened his eyes, turning his head, looking beyond Elizabeth.

There was a man on the bottom of the steps, watching them.

He wore a kind of grayish-khaki coverall—much like Aaron's own, now stuffed in his pack. He wore his hair uncommonly short. And there was a lewd smile on his plain, nondescript features.

The man jumped discernably as Aaron's eyes locked with his.

Aaron halted his caresses, startled.

"What's wrong?" complained Elizabeth. She followed his stare. She turned back, baffled. "What are you looking at?"

She didn't see the man. The refraction and reflection of light that composed the coveralled man's image, naturally passed through her eyes, down her optic nerves. But somewhere after that point it was turned away, ignored. The sight of the man was not permitted to meet with her conscious brain.

Because he was an Overseer.

## VI

A STRANGE SORT of rage suffused Aaron—a combination of anger at being spied upon, and a more intellectual fury at the detestable experiments these people, these Overseers, were involved in.

It was no good to pretend he hadn't seen the man. Their eyes had met. Aaron had visibly reacted to him.

He let go of Elizabeth. "Just who are you?" he challenged. "What's going on in this world?"

—The astonishment seemed to wear off the Overseer. He did not stop for

explanations, but turned and dashed for the door of the monorail car.

Instinctively, Aaron knew he couldn't let the man get away. Flinging Elizabeth brusquely from his side, he threw himself at the short-haired man, tackling him. They fell to the floor, struggling.

Aaron hit the man with his fist to the best of his ability. But he wasn't a trained fighter; most of his blows were ineffective.

He tried a different tack. Stradling the man and grabbing the top of his suit, he said: "Listen. I don't want to hurt you. But I can't let you go back to your fellows until—"

The man smashed him across the jaw with his fist. As the Overseer twisted out from under him, Aaron saw an abrupt scatter of early stars. Dazed, he still managed to retain a one-handed grip on the man's coveralls. The Overseer yanked free with a jerk. There was the dull snapping of the suit's magnetic tabs. The top of the coverall fell free to the man's midriff. The Overseer turned back, aimed a violent kick at Aaron, who and leaped into the vehicle's cab. The door sighed shut.

As Aaron painfully picked himself up, winded, the vehicle began to hum. As he moved shakily toward it, the car rolled away, gaining speed. It whisked away into the tunnel.

Turning back to Elizabeth, he saw that she was gazing at him gape-mouthed. "I saw—I saw—" she sputtered, shaking her head as though to clear it.

He went to her. "Yes. What did you see, Elizabeth? Tell me everything you saw."

"At first you seemed to be fighting with—nobody. And then, suddenly, I saw the—the *top half* of a man flicker into sight. Then you

howled, and he disappeared again. Magic, Aaron? Are you involved with dark forces?" She gave him a frightened look.

"No. No, of course not. What you saw, Elizabeth, was an Overseer."

"A what?"

"Listen, I don't have time to explain right now," he panted. "Suffice it to say he and his fellows *watch* this community, study it. And they're going to be very upset that one of them has been seen—not to mention the fact that I tried to stop him, query him. My friends and I are going to have to take a few measures. I've got to find them, now."

"It's almost the time we set aside for luncheon," she reminded him. "We'll meet them there."

VANA and Chaimon were waiting back at the inn, settled in a booth and expecting lunch, when Aaron swung through the doorway. Elizabeth was on his heels, exhausted. They had hurried all the way back.

Chaimon greeted Aaron's arrival with a cheery enthusiasm. "How was your morning? Ours was simply *terrific*. This is just the *best* imaginable place you could ever want to see, isn't it? Better than any colony I ever envisaged."

Hustling up the table, Aaron struggled for breath. Wearing a wry look Vana waggled a finger toward Chaimon. "Hey, Aaron. Guess who wants to stay here in Morningtown For good!" She noticed his state. "What's wrong with you?"

"Important," Aaron managed to gasp. "Where's Elton?"

Vana shrugged. "About two hours ago, we were approached by a pair of men. They drew him aside, spoke to him only a minute or so. And then they left. After that, Elton seemed

fully excited about something. He said he had to go back to the inn to use the privy. But when we got back, he wasn't here. The innkeeper claims he hasn't seen him all morning." She gave him a meaningful frown. "I think we'd better find him after lunch."

"I think we'd better find him right now," said Aaron.

"But speaking to the citizens was expressly forbidden!" huffed Elizabeth. "You people assured the councilor, and I myself—"

"It all evidently just slid off Elton's mind like water off a duck's back," said Vana. "Besides—he won't have time to do any harm. I really don't know what problems he can cause. Maybe he just wanted to see the place for himself. Maybe he's on his way here right now. What was it you wanted to tell us, Aaron?"

"That can wait. I'll tell you on the way. It's very important that we find him right now."

"Find Elton?" said Chaimon. "But I haven't eaten yet. I want to stay here."

"You won't want to in a little while, think," Aaron said.

THEY HAD NO difficulty finding Elton. Or, rather, where Elton had been. No sooner had the group left the inn, when a young female messenger ran up to them and breathlessly addressed Elizabeth. "Councilor Adelaide demands your immediate presence at the South River Assembly hall. She requests that you bring these 'others' as well. You will follow me."

As they followed, Aaron asked, "What's all this, Elizabeth?"

The woman seemed quite agitated. "The South River Assembly Hall is a small warehouse where certain men congregate to socialize. It has long

been suspected that there is unrest among these men. They wish more say in the government, the heretical fools. They don't understand, don't seem to *realize* that this would cause disharmony. We have chastised some of them, but were never able to prove any treason on their parts. I just pray that such is not the case today—that no unrest is fermenting there right now. And yet—and yet if Councilor Adelaide is involved. . . . Something must be terribly wrong." Her silence was a sullen one the rest of the walk.

In the fifteen minutes it took to reach the South River Assembly Hall, Aaron told Chaimon and Vana what had happened in the subterranean chamber.

"Which means they'll be back in force," murmured Vana when he was finished.

"But how can they *find* us?" asked Chaimon. "I mean, we're wearing the local clothes, aren't we?"

"Like I said, they've got *monitors* down there. Most likely our little Council Room encounter with the bigwigs here was recorded! Oh, they'll know who we are, right enough. And they might be very reasonable about our presence here. But like I said before, I doubt it."

"Good heavens!" said Chaimon. "They might think we're spies, and shoot us down on sight!"

"And ask questions later," said Vana.

"Right. We can't take that chance, right now. This is a bad situation we're in—they'll have us on their own ground. We've got to move on."

"I don't know," said Vana. "I don't exactly feel like a criminal, and I don't want to act like one, running and all that. Maybe we *should* just wait."

"No!" insisted Aaron adamantly.



"I've got a gut-feeling that says we'd better not do that."

Chaimon flashed him a look of misery.

Aaron heard a commotion from down the street. Voices yelling and screaming; glass breaking; the sounds of a rioting crowd.

Drawing in a deep breath, Elizabeth gave them a look of disappointment. "It is even worse than I feared."

As they neared, there was the loud crash of breaking glass: a window shattered.

They turned the corner, and Aaron saw that there was indeed a riot of sorts happening, the like of which he'd never seen before. Throughout history, the common sort of battle was men versus men. This time, it was women against men.

The town's small police force, which consisted partially of men, had been called out. But for all practical and ideological purposes the fight was between the sexes.

At this point, it did not seem to be too serious. The police seemed to be halting the violence and carting the guilty parties away to cool off in secluded quarters. Other men, seeing that they were losing, retreated rapidly for safety. But a few die-hards struggled on, shouting incomprehensible slogans and epithets.

Well away from the scene, observing all this, was a group of Council members, including Councilor Adelaide. She watched the proceedings impassively, arms crossed.

At their approach she spun about, and glared at Elizabeth, who bowed in quiet obeisance.

The Councilor, rage sweeping her features, strode up to the woman, slapped her hard. Elizabeth began to weep.

Furious, Aaron fisted his hand. "It not her fault, you bitch!" he found himself yelling.

Elizabeth grasped his arm. "No! Don't, Aaron!"

His anger still unquelled, he let his arm drop. "Okay, Councilor—at least you can tell us—"

The older woman turned her back on him and addressed herself to Vana: "You and your two companions will leave Morningtown immediately," she said, her voice barely under control.

"Very well," Vana said, moving to stand beside Aaron. "But what about our other companion? What about Eton?"

"That man—" quavered the Councilor. "That man will remain here, to serve as an example. He must men the tear in our Harmony, before it rends further."

"What did he do?" demanded Aaron. "What crime did he commit?"

"He disobeyed my express commands *not* to talk to our citizens. And in the worst manner possible. He has encouraged a spark in our society, he has fanned it into open flame—a spark which we had all but extinguished these past few years, this ludicrous desire on the part of our men to have more power in our society—a notion expressly forbidden by our religion and our consciences."

"But *what* did he do?" repeated Chaimon.

"He told them of your supposed society."

"Is that all?" said Vana. "And what are you going to do to him?"

"He will come to no harm—if he cooperates," responded the Councilor.

"Cooperates—but how?"

"He must publicly acknowledge that the things he told this rabble of men about your 'society' are untruths."

we must admit that our way of life is just, must caution our men to keep in their places."

"I'm beginning to see it now," Vana said to Aaron. "I thought one of those men that talked to Elton looked familiar. He was one of the men with her when she took us to the council yesterday."

"Must have been part of some sort of underground movement," mused Aaron. "The man must have brought us here to discuss Elton's ideas of a man's role in society."

"Oh, God," muttered Vana. "I can't envision what he told them."

"It was fortunate that I had planted spies, and knew what was occurring," said the Councilor, turning around. "Of course, had your companion arrested immediately."

"Then *that* was what caused this, woman!" cried Aaron. "Not Elton!"

The Councilor ignored his outburst, redirecting her attention instead to a squad of her police, the leader of whom she addressed: "You will assist these people as I have directed." She turned once more to Vana. "They will be with you to see that you do not use any further harm. They will act as your escort." With that the woman beckoned her group to follow her, and, gesturing to the tearful Elizabeth to follow her, marched away.

Elizabeth paused to stare searchingly at Aaron.

"I trusted you," she said simply.

"I'm sorry," replied Aaron. "I truly am, Elizabeth."

"I'm disgraced in the eyes of my peers. I have contributed toward unrest in the community." She speared him with a fiery gaze. "I think you deserved it this way."

"That's absurd," responded Aaron. When her anger was like Julie's.

Accusing—fearful. Its quiet intensity, its sizzling touch on his heart.

Damn it all, anyway. He shook off the momentary sense of loss, steeled himself to assume the reins of responsibility in this matter.

Elton was locked up somewhere. They had to get him out.

And get him out before the Overseers returned, in force.

He took her arm, gently.

"Where would they have taken him, Elizabeth?"

"Why should I tell *you*?" She pulled away from his grasp. "Why should I do *anything* more for you at all?" She blinked back tears.

"It wasn't *us* who did this," Vana reminded her. "And Elton didn't exactly go and *look* for trouble. It came to him. Evidently, this men's movement has been under way for awhile. Elton didn't start it. Not even *he* can cause this sort of commotion in a few hours without some help."

Elizabeth looked down at her shoes. "The Justice Building, opposite the Council Building. They'll have him locked in a basement room there." She looked up. "I never said that," she whispered harshly. "And I never want to see *any* of you again."

Delayed replay, thought Aaron as she turned away from him—and them—and strode away.

History repeats itself.

AS SOON as they slammed the door on him, Elton yanked at the two sets of chains that manacled him to the floor. They jangled into tautness. And held.

The big man strained for all he was worth. The musky room about him—bare save for a delapidated cot against one shadowy wall—grew misty pink, swam before him bleakly.

Expelling a breath that was as much a resigned groan, Elton let the

chain links clank to the floor. Wearily, he sank onto the canvas cot, which squeaked precariously with his weight.

"Damn."

The curse was for himself as well as his situation. He stared belligerently at the heavy door, with its small barred window, as though his gaze might burst it open.

He fisted his hands, pounded the wall impotently.

"Damn!"

Damn this little bitch-run town. Damn this whole stinking world. Damn this big clod who *had* to follow those two chumps to their meeting.

"We are fascinated by your possibilities, sir," What was his name? Yes, Purcell had said that. "We simply want to ask you a few questions, learn a little something about yourself, and where you come from. There'll be no harm done, surely?"

And so he had noted their directions, had gone to their meeting in that smelly, drafty warehouse where those hundred or so poor benighted men had hung onto his every word as though each was a rung to a ladder ascending from a fetid pit.

And hell, why *not* tell them? Why not give them the truth?

Of course, he hadn't out and out told them Aaron's suspicions on the true origins of Moringtown. But he *had* given them a pretty good idea of the sort of masculine-oriented society which had eventually given way to the androgynous culture of modern day Earth.

The murmurs of excitement that had rumbled through their ranks—the wild gleams in their eyes. Heady stuff for a speaker like Elton. He had blustered on, whipping them into a sort of controlled frenzy.

Equal rights for men! Throw off the

yoke of distaff bondage! Assume the natural place for men in society—no a cream-puff bland society of staid boredom, but a society with vision with plans, with a future of electric excitement, plowing on through muscular days toward achievement, toward progress, toward goals.

A future to be excited about, to look forward to! *That* was the ticket Elton had told them.

Cresting on the waves of his words well into a description of the wonder of the galaxy that awaited them, Elton had been interrupted by the force of peace-keepers—women *and* men—who had suddenly erupted through the doors and yanked him off the podium.

He had decked a few. Clobbered couple of women, and wasn't *that* satisfying experience! But they overran him, pulled him away, hustled him down streets, dragged him kicking and bellowing through a door, and then locked him in this hole, chained to the floor.

Elton sincerely hoped they had healthy riot on their hands now. Hoped his words had knocked a little sense into the men's heads.

Little good it would do him here.

It was a stupid thing to do. He didn't blame the rest of them if the just let him rot here.

Dumb.

A clicking of a key in the keyhole. The tinkling of a key-chain.

Elton lifted his face out of his hands. The door creaked open. The male guard who had opened it stepped back. A woman entered—middle-aged woman, with short grey hair.

Hildegarde.

"Ah. Mr. Elton," she said with the gear-grinding voice. "You have committed a major indiscretion in our

midst, I understand."

She nodded to the door. It fell shut. The guard's clicking steps faded down the corridor.

"Mister?" said Elton harshly. "Since when was that word in the Morningtown vocabulary?"

She walked heavily to the opposite side of the room, leaned against the wall, arms folded across her chest. She wore the familiar plain community attire rather than her Council robes.

She ignored his sarcasm. "It would appear, Mr. Elton, that you are in a deal of trouble. Consequently, I think your companions will be immediately thrown over the community boundaries, and told to commence their journey, minus one large, big-mouthed lummo."

His muscles knotted, but he kept still. No use floundering about with these prison bracelets attached to his arms.

She continued. "Hence, I have the opportunity of obtaining certain information from you."

His brow creased. "Huh?"

"Come, come, Mr. Elton. Surely you don't think that you can play coy at this stage of the game. I'll admit that I don't understand why you and your companions have played your cards in this—this rather *fumbling* manner up to this point. But you can't expect that I would believe your story of a shipwreck. Washing up on the shore of this island world, so to speak. Not very likely, I find it."

His mind raced. He stared at her hard in the dim light, and the realization came to him in a flicker of thought.

"You're one of *them*, aren't you?"

"Them', Mr. Elton?"

"Yeah." His voice was terse, tense. "The jerks that concocted this cock-

eyed town. It's just an experiment for you, isn't it? Only with living, thinking people! And that's not right."

"Experiment?" She looked at him quizzically. Then her expression broke into a harsh smile. "Ah. I see." She laughed quietly. "But I'm not here to obtain a moral evaluation. I'm here to determine exactly why you and your motley crew have landed on this planet."

"Listen, sister. No matter what I did, the group didn't settle down here on this world—wherever this world is—to rabble-rouse, or cause any kind of trouble. For anybody. We've been vague about our origins because the closed-minded sods of this place would most likely be offended to learn that they're of infinitesimal importance against the backdrop of this human universe. I'll tell you *exactly* who we are, now."

"That would be welcome."

"You see, there was this starship named the *Wayfarer*. Now this starship carried colonists to new worlds. Like me, Vana, Chaimon, and Aaron. They stuck us in one of the carrier modules—number 770, I think. Now these modules also serve as lifeships, if something goes wrong with the *Wayfarer*. Well, something evidently *did* go wrong with the old boat, and instead of waking up on Frederik 201 like we were supposed to, my friends and I found ourselves landed on this place, with a dead lifeship."

He told her the rest, leaving nothing out. What the hell, he figured. There's nothing to leave out.

When he finished, she contemplated him silently. He couldn't read her expression; it was blank.

Pushing herself easily off the wall, she took two steps toward him, stopped. She put her hand inside her blouse, kept it there a moment. "A

very interesting story, Mr. Elton. Very well told. You seem quite sincere." She pulled the hand out. "But now you're going to tell me the truth."

In her hand was a laser gun.

THE POLICE SQUAD, commanded by a tough-bitten looking woman in her middle years, escorted them back to the inn where they gathered up their belongings, stowing everything once more in their backpacks. Aaron had to strain but he hefted Elton's pack as well.

"Okay," Vana told the police captain. "I guess that's it. We're ready to go."

They had not had the opportunity to talk privately among themselves, but both Vana and Aaron had seen the wisdom of apparent capitulation. Chaimon, on the other hand, did not.

"Now just a minute!" the thin man said. "What about Elton? We can't just walk off and leave him to rot here." He dropped his pack at his feet. "I'm not moving an inch."

Aaron was watching the captain; an unfathomable expression slipped quickly across her face and was gone. "Move him," she commanded.

Two of the male police moved toward Chaimon, who flinched but stood his ground. One of the policemen picked up the pack, giving it a curious glance as he did so. Then he thrust it into Chaimon's hands. Chaimon took it automatically and before he could do anything else with it the other policeman took a grip on the back of his collar and thrust him toward the door. Off balance, stumbling, Chaimon fell against the policeman who had given him the pack. That man, in turn, gave him another push. Between them they hustled him through the door and to

the head of the stairs.

"Aaron!" Vana protested as they followed, "They'll push him down the stairs!"

Apparently reaching the same conclusion, Chaimon protested that he could go down the stairs by himself, and proceeded to demonstrate this convincingly enough that he was allowed to do so.

Once on the street, the police captain began marching them away, oblivious to the stares this earned from curious passersby.

They allowed themselves to be escorted in this fashion through a maze of streets, alleys and byways before Vana caught at Aaron's arm and whispered, "Where is she taking us? This isn't the way out of town—"

"Quiet!" the captain commanded. They were now in a deserted mews, their footsteps echoing on the cobblestones. "Prisoners are not to speak!"

"Prisoners?" Vana gasped. "What do you mean, 'prisoners'? Where are you taking us?"

"Justice," was the captain's laconic reply. "To join your companion."

"The Councilor—this isn't what she told us!" Vana exclaimed.

"It's what she told *me*," the captain said, her voice a smug purr.

"What do you mean?"

"She wants you out of Morningtown—out of her hair," the captain said. "If we just expell you, you'll be back. Why, there's no where else to go! This way you won't come back."

"We—won't . . . come back?"

"They mean to execute us, Vana," Aaron said quietly.

"They're going to *kill* us? These, uh, *benevolent* people?" Chaimon asked, halting suddenly.

"Keep moving, you," one of the

policemen said.

"The hell I will," Chaimon exclaimed. "You want to kill me, I'm not going to make it *easy* for you. Do it here!" He thrust out his chin with that note of bravado.

The policeman neatly clipped him, the blow catching Chaimon on his outthrust jaw and dropping him like a marionette whose strings have been cut.

Aaron had not been idle during this exchange. Shrugging off Elton's pack, he reached into it and felt the cold metal of the laser gun, fitting his palm around its butt.

He drew out the weapon and pointed it significantly at the police captain. "I think we've gone far enough," he said.

She stared with amusement at the gun and told Vana, "We've wasted enough time here. Tell him to help his friend to his feet."

Vana grinned at her. "Uh-uh," she said.

Aaron pointed the gun at a cobblestone at the captain's feet and fired. A thin beam of congruent light, too pale to be visible, lanced from the gun to the stone. In brief seconds the stone glowed, then exploded, the water it contained having turned instantly and explosively to vapor.

The explosion took the woman by complete surprise and she fell backwards with a cry of astonishment and pain. Her legs were covered with blood. The exploding cobblestone was, at close range, like a fragmentation grenade, Aaron realized with sudden dismay. That was more than he'd been expecting.

But there was nothing else to be done now—he had to take command of the situation. Menacingly, he waved the gun at the policemen whose faces betrayed their new-found

respect for the object he held. He lined them up against the wall while their captain lay moaning on the cobblestones.

"Well done, Aaron," Chaimon said, face glowing with exultation. "That's turned the tables!"

"But, Aaron," Vana said. "What do we do now?"

"Very simple," Aaron said. "Take your clothes off."

"Right *here*?" Chaimon protested.

But Vana had understood and already she was undressing herself. Aaron pointed the laser gun at the cowering policemen while Vana and then Chaimon stripped and donned their ship clothes—the single-piece coveralls they'd worn until they'd come to Morningtown.

Ignoring the policemen's gasps of astonishment as two of their erstwhile captives disappeared quite suddenly from view, Aaron doffed his own native clothes, leaving then in a heap on the paving, and with a final Cheshire grin stepped into his own coverall and out of their sight.

THEY HAD BEEN LED almost to the back of the Justice Building—the building in which Elizabeth had said Elton was already imprisoned. Feeling clumsily weighted down by the backpacks but seeing no alternative to carrying them, Aaron and Vana and Chaimon strode boldly out of the mews and around the corner to the front entrance of the building that faced the Council Hall. Invisible to the natives of Morningtown in their Overseer-like coveralls, they made no attempt at stealth.

Once inside the building Aaron led them to a hallway where a single policeman stood duty. Aaron walked up to the man and planted himself directly before him. Then, speaking

clearly and distinctly, Aaron said, "I am the voice of Heaven."

The man's eyes started and he turned quickly around and then back in the direction he'd first been facing. "I—what? Who?"

"The people of Morningtown have taken the wrong path," Aaron intoned, sententiously. "A great error has been made."

The policemen fell to his knees, prayerfully. "Not me," he said. "I've done nothing. I swear it!"

"The outsider—where has he been put?"

"In—in—below . . ." the man stammered.

"Go to him now and release him," Aaron commanded, wondering if he was laying it on too thick.

"But—but—she's with him now!" the policeman protested.

"Who?"

"Council member Hildegarde, your . . . ah, your grace."

Aaron wanted to ask more questions, but it didn't seem in character for the Voice of Heaven. "Go to him now and release him," he repeated. "Rise and do as you have been bid."

Mouthing obsequities the policeman clambered to his feet and moved shakily down the corridor to a stairway that led down to a dank and cellar-like area off which barred-window doors of heavy wood were arrayed. As Aaron, Chaimon and Vana followed closely behind the man a scream sounded sharply.

"Elton!" Vana cried aloud.

The policeman stopped, startled by the new sound of her voice, but Aaron looked beyond him to the one door from whose window light spilled out. That had to be Elton's cell—what were they doing to him? There was no time to waste on civilities now.

Reversing the heavy gun in his hand, Aaron brought its butt down on the unsuspecting policeman's head.

*Not hard enough.* The policeman sank, shock on his face, to his knees, throwing his hands up in supplication, then over his head—still conscious. Dammit, I've got to stop being a nice guy and stop pulling my punches, Aaron realized in a flash of self-accusation.

"Give me," Vana muttered, and took the gun. Stepping behind the still speechless policeman she delivered a second blow that crumpled him to the floor. "I can't abide violence," she said as she handed the gun back to Aaron. "Let's get this over with—fast."

As if to punctuate her thought a fresh scream ripped the air.

Chaimon was already at the cell door. It was unlocked and a little ajar. He yanked it open and was about to go through it when a thin beam, brilliant in the cellar gloom, lanced out and struck the opposite wall with a shower of sparks. Chaimon stumbled back with an amazed expression as Elton's voice shouted from the cell—"Watch out! She's got a—" his voice suddenly choked off.

"Back," Aaron shouted. "Get out of the line of sight!"

"But," Vana protested, "if that's Hildegarde, she can't see—"

"Don't you see?" Aaron gritted out. "All bets are off! She's got a—"

A second laser beam streaked out to stitch a glowing line on the wall.

*But so do I,* Aaron realized. And he'd have to use it now.

"Try to come in," growled a woman's voice, "And your friend gets fried." There was no mistaking Hildegarde's gruff tones. Did she know he had a similar weapon? No. And that was the wild card.



Aaron felt the thickness of fear tighten his throat. His voice trembled. "All right. We surrender."

"Aaron!" hissed Vana.

A finger to his lips shushed her. Gripping his weapon tightly, he called out, "You're one of them, aren't you, Hildegard? I'm surprised we weren't overpowered by your people last night while we slept. But you haven't told your superiors yet, have you? Why?"

"I wasn't sure what your game was. I needed to watch you—see what you were up to, before I made a report. Also, I was curious as to how your advent would affect Morningtown. And just who you were. Elizabeth was to find that out. Just now, I was learning from your friend." There was a shadowy flicker at the doorway. She was coming out. "Now I'll be able to find out from you all. Whose employ are you in?"

He caught a dim glimmer of metal: her laser framed by darkness. She advanced behind it:

Aaron dropped to one knee and fired.

The beam cut through Hildegard's arm. She bounced off the door with a scream, tottered, and fired her laser again. Its deadly coherent beams of light streaked out, slashing fire along the opposite wall. Wrong arm. Too hasty. Do it again—carefully, this time. Oh, God, he hated this.

Swinging his beam down, Aaron pressed his trigger again. As the woman stumbled out, he caught her across the neck, nearly decapitating her.

He felt sick.

He'd never killed before.

But it had been necessary.

He rose, dashed into the room.

Manacled to the floor was Elton. The big man lay in a ragged heap. He

looked up blearily at Aaron, and sighed painfully.

"Are you hurt?" asked Aaron.

"Nothing serious. A burn here and there. She had her beam on low."

"She was torturing you."

"Yah. C'mon. Lase off these goddam chains. I want to get out of this place."

NO ONE waited for them outside. The path was clear.

Aaron had picked up the dead Councilwoman's laser, and given it to Vana; Elton was still a bit wobbly to be carrying, let alone using, a weapon. It had been hard enough to get him dressed in his coveralls. Walking boldly out of Elton's prison seemed almost anticlimactic.

Nothing seemed amiss. No one saw them. Walking at as fast a pace as they could manage, Elton's all-but-inexhaustible reserves at a low ebb and Chaimon complaining, now that he could do so easily, about his bruises and possibly broken jaw, Vana and Aaron carrying all four backpacks, they finally reached the outskirts of town.

It occurred to Aaron during that walk that he would have liked to have shown them all the monorail chamber with its machinery and observation systems, but such a move at this time was out of the question. There was no telling how many Overseers might be about—and he had killed one of their number. A description would have to suffice.

"Hey, hold on a moment," said Chaimon, glancing about him as they moved amidst the farmlands surrounding the small town, their path paralleling the river. He was the first to speak. "Aaron—we're going the wrong way. Over yonder is the side of the town which we entered, following

the monorail track. We're moving now at a ninety degree angle to the path of that track. I thought we were headed toward the spaceport. That's east and we're headed north. This isn't the right direction."

Vana angled her head, nodding. "He's right."

Elton seemed too exhausted to care much.

Keeping his eyes straight ahead, only occasionally looking back toward the town to check for possible pursuers, Aaron explained. "We've got to take a different course. They know about us now—there's no doubt about that. Chances are they'll figure we'll follow this particular monorail track. So they'll scour the countryside around it. Chances are these tracks radiate around the spaceport—or whatever it is that's giving off that radiation. We've got a better chance of making that spaceport on our own terms if we move out, and find another track to follow."

"And we better keep away from the communities," said Elton quietly. "There's something even worse happening on this planet than you imagined, Aaron. I'm not entirely sure exactly what, but our dead friend Hildegard showed me a side of it I don't care to dwell on." He shuddered and let loose a convulsive sigh.

"There's a great deal to discuss, I think," muttered Vana. "But let's save our breath for right now, and concentrate on moving away from this place."

At the crest of the hill, Aaron watched as Chaimon paused, turned around, and quietly regarded their last sight of the place called Morningtown.

As the other two moved ahead, Aaron approached him, put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Yet another dream rudely awakened, Chaimon?"

"Too good to be true," responded the other. "Too good to be true." He turned a wry smile upon Aaron. "Besides. I probably would have gotten pretty bored there after a while, anyway."

Well, thought Aaron. My lad, you've got a lot of excitement in store in the future.

"No boredom ahead, though," said Chaimon, echoing Aaron's thoughts.

"Oh, I sincerely hope there's lots and lots of it," Aaron chuckled as they turned around. "C'mon. We better catch up with the others."

It was mid-afternoon as they walked away from Morningtown.

—DAVE BISCHOFF  
& TED WHITE

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### ON SALE NOW IN SEPT. FANTASTIC

**THE ISLANDS OF TIME** by JACK DANN, **THE WHISPERERS** by RICHARD A. LUPOFF, **FLEUVE RED** by ROBERT F. YOUNG, **INDIGESTION** by BARRY N. MALZBERG, **THE LADY OF FINNIGANS HEATH** by PARKE GODWIN, **TOM O'BEDKAN'S NIGHT OUT** by DARRELL SCHWEITZER, **WITH GOOD INTENTIONS** by F. X. MILHAUS, and many new features.

## Or So You Say (cont. from page 4)

A company might be unable to pay at the time the petition was filed, but it might be quite able to pay a day, a week or a month later, when accounts receivable came in, or, if it were given a chance to convert some of their assets into cash, pay off and still continue operations. It is not uncommon for billion-dollar-a-year conglomerates, today, to sell off one of their best companies, in order to meet a large note come due. Just because they haven't got cash in the till doesn't mean they are broke. Under the old involuntary bankruptcy law, it was easy to extend credit, slap down hard and force a company into a situation where it could be obtained for a fraction of its worth. Hugo Gernsback claimed that he was victim of such a conspiracy and that Bernarr MacFadden was the mastermind behind it. I must assume that Perry now claims that Gernsback was a liar and that the company of which he was President somehow backed the suppliers who put it into bankruptcy.

Now in research, there are places from which information is obtained that are called "Primary Sources." A "Primary Source" would be either one of the individuals involved, actual copies of salient documents, letters and similar matter. There are also repositories of information which are called "Secondary Sources," and the most common of secondary sources are printed matter like books, magazines, newspapers and announcements. My information on Hugo Gernsback came from Hugo Gernsback, his son M. Harvey Gernsback (who is still alive), as well as secondary sources. Now a primary source, when it is an involved person, as Hugo Gernsback was, can link the information together with motive, logic and continuity. Secondary sources, even when accurate (and as a former newspaper man Perry would not care to bank his life on the precision of the average newspaper story dashed off before deadline), force the

reader or researcher to guess, or fictionalize the circumstances surrounding the information. That is what Perry has done.

In order to justify his conclusions, he has pulled a completely dishonest act. If he has not pulled a dishonest act, then he is one of the most inept, incompetent researchers I have ever seen. If he is dishonest, then no credibility can be given his statements and imaginings. If incompetent, most certainly no credence can be given his statements.

In order to "prove" that the entire matter concerning Gernsback, a good deal of it derived from me, was completely untrustworthy he has quoted from the brochure "Hugo Gernsback: 'Father of Science Fiction,'" printed by Criterion Linotype in 1959, in a limited edition of 300 as a birthday surprise the error that "One day in April 1929, Gernsback was awakened early in the morning by the telephone." It so happens, that when this essay later appeared in my book *Explorers of the Infinite* from The World Publishing Company in 1966, this error had been corrected on page 239 to read: "On February 20, 1929 Gernsback was awakened early in the morning by the telephone."

Now *Explorers of the Infinite* has never been out of print since its publication in 1966. It has seen three hardcover printings and two paperback printings (the first paperback printing by Meridian Press in 1968). It is in print right now from Hyperion Press in both hardcover and paperback. It is unquestionably one of the easiest of all the science fiction histories to find and on the shelves of many libraries. Now Perry *deliberately* quoted the early 1959 booklet, so that he could "prove it wrong" by demonstrating a newspaper story had appeared *earlier* than April, gloating in delight: "If Gernsback was incredulous about the bankruptcy on a morning in April, he must have had

quite a bad memory, because the petition for involuntary bankruptcy was filed on February 20, 1929. It seems curious that Gunn apparently checked this one item from the Moskowitz myth of 1949 and nothing else." No, phoney researcher Perry, Gunn never checked that fact, he got it right out of my book, where you pretended to overlook it. It should also be noted that the book spells MacFadden's name correctly in every instance, but Perry dishonestly didn't want to quote from that, but preferred to quote from the privately printed brochure seven years earlier so that he could show "McFadden" spelt without the "A." I think "contemptible" is the right word for that type of person.

Then he tries to intimate that I deliberately whitewashed Gernsback out of friendship by stating: "Read this, then, for what it is—not an attempt at an objective historical account, but a birthday greeting for a 75-year-old man by a former employee who got his start in editing from Gernsback." To show the value of Perry's speculations from what he reads, those turning to Page 45 of the May, 1959 issue of *Satellite Science Fiction* will find announced in bold-faced type: "In the Next Issue Another Great Article Hugo Gernsback: The Father of Science Fiction by Sam Moskowitz." Obviously I wrote the article for that magazine, where I had published nine previous articles in the series which eventually were collected as *Explorers of the Infinite*, and not as a birthday greeting for Gernsback. The later birthday booklet is a separate story in itself.

One suspects Perry's rationality when he does "handsprings" trying to prove that Gernsback's creditors may have been paid instead of \$1.08 on the dollar no more than \$103.3 cents on the dollar. How often do "bankrupt" companies do that well? Is a company more than "technically"

bankrupt when its assets are worth more than its liabilities? Even here, he quotes the papers as having said that "Liabilities are *estimated* at \$600,000." That word "estimated" is very important, but Perry accepts \$600,000 as gospel and from a newspaper story. He does not produce a breakdown of assets or liabilities. A publishing company, when it does not own its own presses, and Gernsback did not, has very little *physical* in the way of assets. Outside of cash in the bank, there would be the office furniture, unsold books and back number issues of the magazine, and *accounts receivable*. The most important is the accounts receivable. The \$182,000 given as the "assets" of the company had to be wrong and far too low for a reason that Perry being obviously ignorant of publishing would not know. Magazine publishers are not paid by the distributor for copies sold of their magazines until 90 days after they go off sale. Gernsback, therefore, had to work three months ahead on all his publications. The Experimenter Publishing Company, Inc., at that time had four monthly magazines: *Radio News*, *Science and Invention*, *Short Wave Listener's Guide* and *AMAZING STORIES*. *Radio News* was the biggest money maker, but the distributor owed Gernsback *newstand receipts for three issues apiece of these magazines*. In addition, he published quarterly *AMAZING STORIES QUARTERLY*, *Your Body*, *Radio Listeners Guide & Call Book*, *Aereo Mechanics*; a book publishing adjunct Conrad, and a continuous series of one-shot newstand publications selling for 25 cents and 50 cents. The quarterlies all sold for 50 cents, and the distributor owed him for at least one each of those.

All of these magazines had advertising. *Radio News* averaged 40 pages a month, *Science & Invention*, 30 pages a month, *Short Wave Listener* 20 pages a month, *AMAZING STORIES* 15 pages a month and there was advertising

ing in all the quarterlies. These people could not be billed until the magazines appeared on the newstands, and for some of them Gernsback would have contracts 12 months ahead.

In addition to that the three *Radio News*, *Science and Invention* and *Short Wave Listener* in particular, had very large subscription lists with renewals coming in literally on a daily basis to the tune of many thousands a month. Added to that, the radio part of station WRNY had advertising income from commercials. Knowing personally what distributors pay for various priced magazines, averaging their circulation, and approximate advertising rates, I conservatively estimated that Gernsback's accounts receivable had to be a minimum of \$350,000 from the distributor, advertising, subscriptions, etc., exclusive of whatever assets were in the bank and on the shelf, and almost all of that would come in within three months.

As for liabilities, according to accounting procedures, if Gernsback had a 10 year lease on his offices at \$15,000 a year, he would *technically* owe \$150,000. All *unfulfilled* subscriptions are carried on the books as *liabilities*. Since Gernsback paid on publication and after publication, the money he owed all contributors for the issues prepared but not distributed would be liabilities. The printer, paperman, engraver, would not be paid until he received his money from distributors and advertisers for the issues involved.

It can be seen from this that Gernsback's assets were undoubtedly much greater than the \$182,000 and his *true* liabilities much less than the \$600,000. I might also note that The Irving Trust Company was Hugo Gernsback's *own bank*, where he kept his money and got his loans, and the main reason they were willing to act as a trustee was to ensure their own investment. The Irving Trust

Company, was *still* Gernsback's bank when I went to work for him in 1952.

The major point of contention is, was Gernsback's company actually insolvent or was it the victim of a conspiracy on the part of Bernarr MacFadden as he claimed? That point is very easily proved. *I had a Dun & Bradstreet check done on Gernsback's operations* including The Experimenter Publishing Co., Inc. (which I have on file at home). The check showed that The Experimenter Publishing Co., Inc. was formed on March 10, 1926 with Hugo Gernsback as president. Between the time that it was formed and "an involuntary petition of bankruptcy filed on February 20, 1929, it paid a total of 84% of the value of the stock in dividends. The Dun & Bradstreet check further showed that *after all creditors had been paid, after bankruptcy, a dividend of 1/4% was paid to the stockholders*, and the matter closed! If that isn't bankruptcy deluxe what do you call it? Certainly 84% in stockholder dividends in less than three years certainly does not indicate an unprofitable company!

Now the final matter, was it just Gernsback's imagination that MacFadden was behind a conspiracy to seize control of his company? When the Irving Trust Company took over as trustee, they installed B. A. Mackinnon as *Business Manager* (or watchdog). There was no problem keeping the magazine going because adequate money was coming in from the distributor, advertisers and subscribers on a continuing basis. Perry's statement that the Irving Trust "somehow kept the company going," is so naive as to be unbelievable, since even if they did not have a healthy company on their hands they happen to be one of the largest banks in the world.

There could be no investigation of MacFadden unless he had gotten the magazines, but Mackinnon beat him out. The company changed names at

least three times after that to Radio Science Publications, E. P. Publishing Co. and finally Teck Publishing company, each time at a different address. Finally, and this is the payoff, "The Statement of Ownership," which each magazine must publish once a year appeared on Page 863 of the December, 1931 issue of AMAZING STORIES, more than two years after the company had been forced into bankruptcy and it put the place of printing and publication as Dunellen, N. J., the giant printing plant where *True Story*, *Physical Culture* and *Liberty* were published and it listed as owners of the magazine MacFadden Publications and Bernarr MacFadden at 1926 Broadway, N.Y.! Do I have to draw pictures?

What we have here now, in Thomas Perry is a man who had the temerity to state: "For this Moskowitz account is false in almost every particular that can be checked," after research of probably two hours in a Chicago library. On the basis of his two hours of findings, all of which he misunderstood, misinterpreted, and distorted, in one fell sweep he declared James Gunn, David A. Kyle, Sam Lundwell, Frederik Pohl and myself as not fit to bask in the light of his exalted presence and anointed himself as a great science fiction researcher. He now stands exposed as thoroughly dishonest in deliberately selecting older material in favor of widespread corrected material to falsify his case and thoroughly incompetent in his analysis of what material he did find.

On that basis, I don't think you should be apologizing to anyone Ted, rather, I think Perry should be apologizing to you.

SAM MOSKOWITZ  
Newark, N.J. 07107

*It is my policy to give equal space to anyone who feels himself unjustly criticised in these pages. Sam*

Moskowitz's letter appears here uncut, in precisely the form in which it was received. Although I have not changed (or "corrected") any of the spelling and punctuation, one sentence contains what is surely an error of composition: "... Gernsback's creditors may have been paid instead of \$1.08 on the dollar no more than \$103.3 cents on the dollar." Since Sam's letter was hand-corrected in pencil to read thus, I have not changed it, either. However, this error points up a larger one. Perry did not do "handsprings" trying to prove" that point; he wrote: "So there is nothing here to indicate that the creditors received \$1.08 for each \$1.00 due them." Even if the administration expenses had been nothing, there would have been only some \$620,000 to split up, which would be about 103.3 percent." Administration expenses, Perry indicated, were not nothing; he quoted the New York Times to the effect that creditors received a guaranteed 95% of their claims. Therefore the figure of 103.3 percent (or \$1.03 on the dollar) is a passing hypothesis, cited only to prove how unlikely the figure of \$1.08 would be. I am not impressed by the way in which these figures have been juggled by Moskowitz in his foregoing letter, and although I have no position of my own in this dispute, I suggest readers wishing to decide between the points of view given by Perry and Moskowitz read both accounts side by side for discrepancies between them and the points they each raise.—TW

Dear Ted,

I have seldom read a short story, sf or otherwise, which possessed the sheer power and perfection of Rich Brown's "Two of a Kind" in the March AMAZING. I am not embarrassed to admit that I didn't even suspect that the protagonist had led the "feds" to his own home until he called his wife by name. The clues



were there, I can see them now, but the power of the story drew me into too much to realize. Every detail of the story was done to perfection, and it's a credit to both you and Rich Brown. Twenty years ago, a story with much less shock-value could have attained the same effect, but "Two of a Kind" is the first story since I saw in Harlan's *Dangerous Visions* and *Again, Dangerous Visions* to pull off by today's standards.

The rest of the issue was excellent, though, unfortunately, my appreciation of the stories was diminished by their comparison with Rich's excellent story.

By the way, I noticed that the cover was actually by Steve Hickman, not Bierley.

DOUG FRATZ  
2008 Erie St. #2  
Adelphi, MD 20783

*Quite true, and we owe Hickman an apology for giving credit for his cover painting to the artist who did our February FANTASTIC cover—an error we didn't catch until the issue was printed.—TW*

Dear Mr. White,

I must express my disappointment with Richard W. Brown's "Two of a Kind." The plot, I thought, was quite predictable, and lacking an interesting plot, the story was then forced to rely on its style and characterization.

Its style, principally explicit language, I found personally offensive and bordering on gratuitous in its necessity to the story. A character's language is a useful tool in creating his characterization, but I believe Mr. Brown exceeded the limits of what was necessary in this case and relied on it too heavily for carrying the reader through to the dénouement. Without explicit language the characterization of the two Feds was rather shallow, and I'm afraid the other characters fared no better. Thus, Mr. Brown was faced with the difficult task of using a familiar (if not

overworked) plot, populating it with shallow characters, and attempting to add life to both with overly graphic and coarse (my opinion, of course) language. I feel he failed, as I believe most writers would have if they had restricted themselves in the ways Mr. Brown did.

I admire you for printing it, Mr. White, as I feel it was a risky thing to do, but you had every right to do it. Personally, I would not care to read another story such as "Two of a Kind" any time in the near future unless it had more to recommend it than explicit language. "Two of a Kind" was shocking, but hardly memorable. Instead, it was a strong lesson in what not to do in a story.

CHRIS RUPPENTHAL  
9 Linden St.  
Cambridge, Mass. 02138

Dear Ted:

Trash. Sick trash. I'm thirty-three years old, and I've been reading sf for around twenty years. I'm sure glad my introduction to the genre was not by way of a story such as Robert W. Brown's "Two of a Kind" in the March '77 issue of AMAZING. It's hard for me to imagine how you rationalize publishing such crap. Do you seriously believe that sf needs stories of explicit and detailed perversion? Do you feel that is moving in a constructive direction? I find it hard to imagine that a majority of readers would not believe as I do—that such stories are both unsuitable and unnecessary in a magazine of AMAZING's stature. You, as editor, should be protecting us from such tasteless writing, not assaulting us with it. I was sad when I finished that story. I had never before considered not reading AMAZING; now, self-protection may leave me no alternative.

TOM JOY  
2417 Richmond, Apt. 6  
Mattoon, IL 61938



*Rich Brown replies:*

A good story should be its own defense. I believe that if an author does not succeed in communicating what he hopes to communicate in his story, there is little chance he can do so in defending it from criticism—but I also note that most of the negative comment on “Two of a Kind” has been more *reaction* than criticism. The nature of that reaction deserves some quiet, careful consideration.

Some of it has been slightly hysterical—rather like a *Daily News* editorial, you know, wherein each sentence *feels* as though it should be shouted angrily at the top of one’s lungs.

Tim McManus [whose letter follows.—rw] offers one of the few decent pieces of criticism—by which I mean the sort of thing I would listen to if it were brought up in a Clarion-type situation—when he says that if technology is as advanced as I imply it is in “Two of a Kind” (laser pistols, shields, etc.) there would be “more sophisticated and efficient” ways to hunt people like my protagonists. Tim is right—as far as he goes. The most sophisticated and efficient way to go on a Big Game Hunt might well be to go in a Sherman Tank—yet very few hunting expeditions are conducted in one.

Were it not for another consensus reached by these would-be critics, I would be profoundly disturbed by one comment that runs through several of the letters—that “Two of a Kind” either had no plot or a well-worn plot. The plot of most works of fiction can be summarized as follows: The protagonist (main character) is faced with a problem; the protagonist attempts to deal with this problem (sometimes causing other problems which also must be dealt with); then, either the protagonist overcomes the problem or the problem overcomes the protagonist. This defines the plot of *The Odyssey*, of *Hamlet*, of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, of *Ten Little*

*Indians*—and it defines the plot “Two of a Kind”.

But is it an overworked plot? Well in the sense that most plots can be summarized as above, of course a plots are commonplace or trite—the variety comes in the *treatment* of the plot, which is to say the nature of the problem and the manner in which the protagonist attempts to deal with it. I would certainly never claim that “Two of a Kind” was not without influences—*The Year of the Quiet Sun* (explicitly acknowledged by the name I chose for my protagonist), “Boy and His Dog,” “Things Are Tough All Over,” and “Made in U.S.A.” all share one or more themes with my story—but I believe an objective reading will show that the treatment is wholly my own; no other, to my knowledge, has dealt with these themes and problems in this way.

So I think it’s safe to say that these people either don’t know what a plot really is, or are complaining that entire *categories* of sf are old hat. Pointless commentary, provided the *treatment* of each is different), or—cannot help but think this the more likely—they are attempting to buttress their primary objection by heaping meaningless abuse on other aspects of the story.

Their primary objection is that violent rape is depicted in explicit language and graphic detail. This is the core of their argument. Let’s skip over the fact that the scene flows logically from the premise of the story, the result of all the forces and personalities which have been brought into play—since it is not likely to change an already made-up mind—and talk, instead, about the place of sex in science fiction.

While I believe sex and its depiction has a legitimate place in sf as long as science fiction is about human beings and the effects of extrapolate changes on human beings, I have not exploited this belief to any significant

extent in my stories. I hope the implicit sexuality of my characters has made them more realistic; but in my fiction their acts of lovemaking have always been implied rather than shown for the simple reason that their sexuality has never been central to the plot. This is not so of "Two of a Kind": The violent rape of Loretta Wilson was not pretty, nor pleasant, nor "erotic", nor was it intended to be any of these—but it *was* central to the plot; it was not gratuitous. It was an excruciatingly gut-wrenching scene to write—and apparently equally gut-wrenching to read. It was not presented with the lip-smacking approval of a John Norman with the underlying assumption that women secretly desire this sort of thing, but as I envisioned such a scene realistically to be—the horror and cruelty of the violation of one human being by another. It is not unintentional irony that, in this very act, Loretta Wilson's previously impervious tormentors become vulnerable to a retribution every bit as violent as their act.

I do not feel that I owe any apology to anyone for that scene—indeed, I feel that any other treatment would have been dishonest. Until I hear otherwise, I will not believe that I have to write dishonestly for the majority of AMAZING's readers.

In his blurb for the story, Ted White said that it was "one not for the squeamish." By now readers realize that he meant what he said. And so do I: I stand by "Two of a Kind", its plot, characters, extrapolations, horrifying visions, themes, choice of language. If it is as good a story as I honestly believe it to be, it will be its own defense.

RICH BROWN  
Falls Church, Va. 22042

Dear Mr. White,

I have been a reader of sf books for about half of my 26 years.

Unfortunately (for me), I have just started to get into the magazines and I now realize what I have been missing. For the past six or seven months I have been sampling three or four magazines a month and have found the experience fantastic (sorry about that, at least I didn't add amazing). I have enjoyed the issues I have read of both AMAZING and FANTASTIC and look forward to making them part of my regular reading.

From a new fan: Nice Work!

As a new fan I have comments about the writings of two people in your March '77 issue. First, I didn't care for the inclusion of Richard Brown's story; it added nothing to your magazine and I suspect that for many readers it took much away. While I was (am) not bothered by the language, I did feel it was out of place. There are plenty of magazines which print stories with sex and no plot and when I want to read such things I know where to buy them. More importantly, Brown's story offered little except his graphic descriptions. It seemed far too weak on plot and development of ideas (e.g. people with laser guns and "field suits" would certainly have more sophisticated and efficient means of "hunting" than walking aimlessly through the wilderness hoping to run across their prey) to merit any space in your magazine.

Second, who the hell is Steven Duff? I think it is great that you allow space for readers to discuss their likes and dislikes and their reasons for such reactions, but three-and-a-half pages of garbage? As I mentioned, sf magazines are new to me so maybe Duff is supposed to be someone whose opinions mean something, but I doubt it (except perhaps in his own little mind). While I admire you for printing such a critical letter (for what it's worth, I liked most of the stories in September '76), it seems as though Duff's letter (or should I call it a self imposed column) cheated the readers

of several pages of worthwhile reading.

As may be obvious I had a very negative reaction to Duff's letter and I would like to respond to it in some depth, but then I would be guilty of the same abuse of space as he was. While I would not judge someone from one letter (even when it was so damn long), a few general observations:

1. Rape by "queens" or kings can never be tolerated, but what of the rights of those gays who choose to find fulfillment in their own way and never bother anyone else (no Duff, I'm not gay). Blind prejudice is far more harmful and perverse than various sex acts between consenting adults.

2. Duff seems proud of once being in a street gang (big deal), so I assume he is willing to be a hate object for all the friends and loved ones of those who have been raped, murdered, and so on by such gangs. Certainly he wouldn't say such generalizations are unfair, or would he (?), good old double standard and all that tripe.

3. Duff is good at taking cheap shots and I can think of a million he should be subject to, but of course I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing to such a big man of the world (really now). A few of the things I wouldn't say (you ask):

a. perhaps Duff sees so many people as "turds" due to an anal fixation or perhaps due to his way of viewing the "real world" (rectal-cranial inversion?);

b. could it be he protests too much (anyone know of a macho who fears, heaven forbid, that he is a latent homosexual?);

c. and so on.

Oh well Duff at least your name seems holely (sic) appropriate; the sic may fit also.

TIM MCMANUS  
1366 Sheridan Dr. #102  
Lancaster, Ohio 43130

Dear Ted,

In the March AMAZING, you criticize the MidAmeriCon Committee for not exercising enough judgment to keep people likely to make fools of themselves in public from embarrassing the audience and wasting their time. If that's a responsibility of a con committee, it's even more surely the responsibility of an editor. Yet you gave three and a half pages of the lettercol over to Duff's letter, which you then briefly dismissed as "disgusting," implying that it wasn't worth the 11¢ postage due you had to pay. You've done this sort of thing before—for example, printing some particularly assinine remark made about you in a letter or the fan press, and then (quite correctly) dismissing it as not worth the paper it was printed on. If a letter or other criticism is really without merit, then don't print it. If you *do* find it worth printing, then deal with it seriously.

While the MidAmeriCon committee's problem seems to have been merely negligence, you appear to take a sadistic delight in letting your detractors make public asses of themselves, pointing out particularly juicy infelicities with *sic's* and otherwise milking them to portray yourself as a martyr much put upon by fools (like mentioning the postage due). We all get crank letters, though someone in your position perhaps more than someone in mine; but that's what trash cans are for. The space used to print such nonsense is wasted, as far as I'm concerned. I would much prefer to see comments with substance and merit—and, as an editor, it's your job to find and print such material.

ERWIN S. "FILTHY PIERRE" STRAUSS  
9099 Good Luck Road T2  
Lanham, MD 20801

*If I had regarded Duff's letter as 'really without merit,' I would not have published it. But I did not. I felt*

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